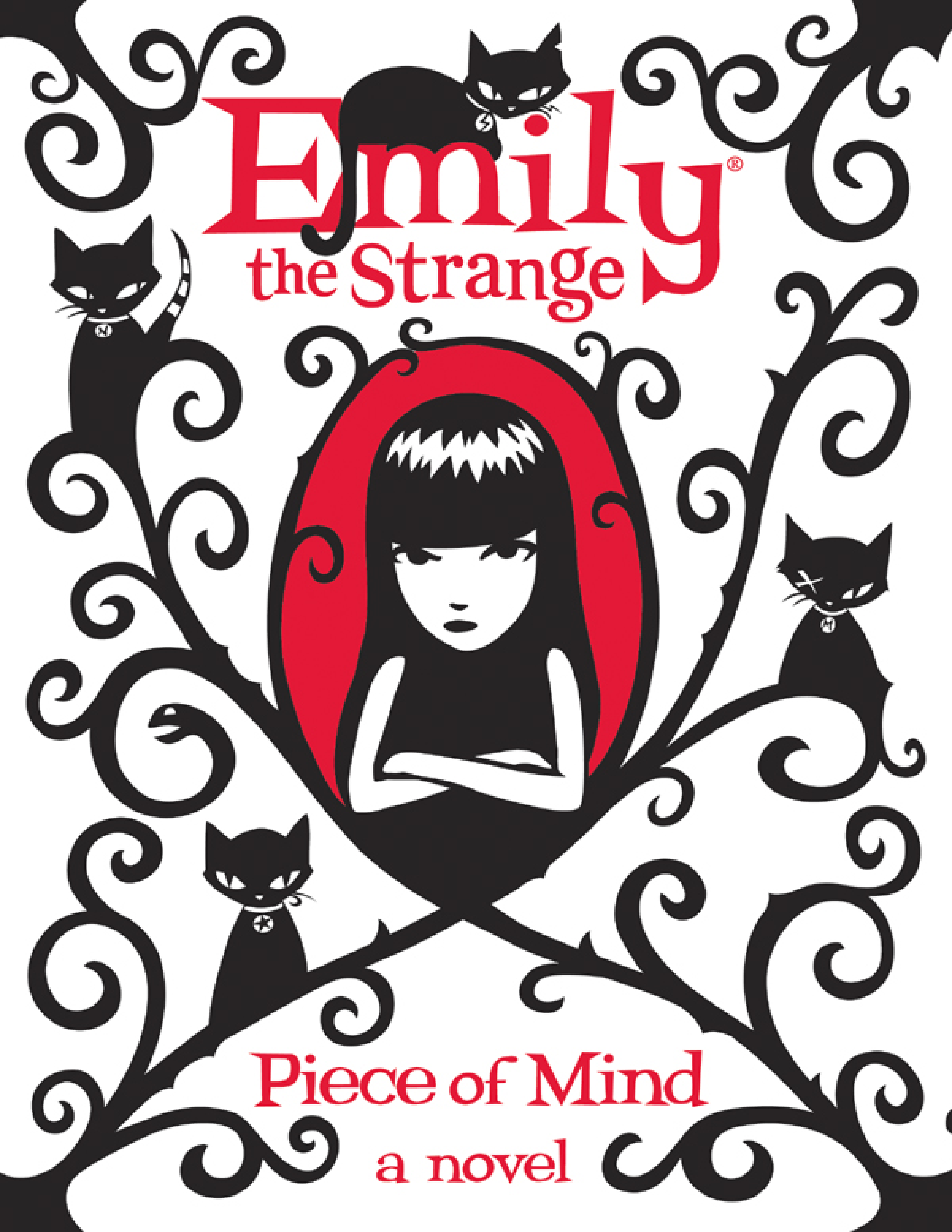

Emily® the Strange

Piece of Mind

a novel

Rob Reger and Jessica Gruner

Emily the Strange
Piece of Mind

Illustrated by
Rob Reger and Buzz Parker

HARPER

Dedication

for Lupa (the punk-rock kitty)

Apple blossoms give
Fuzzy memories of one
Sweet little Lupa

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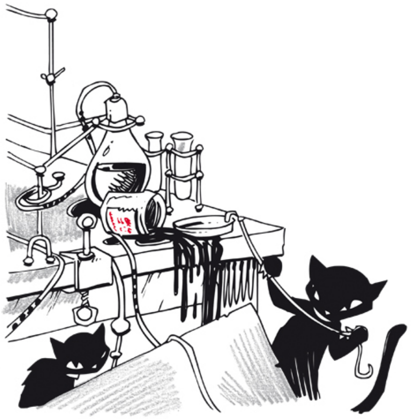
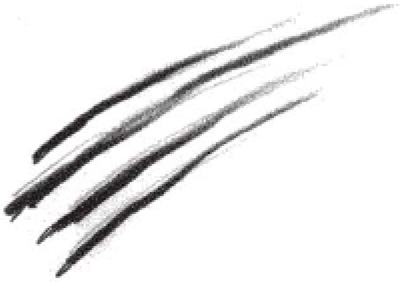
May 8

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.
—Mark Twain

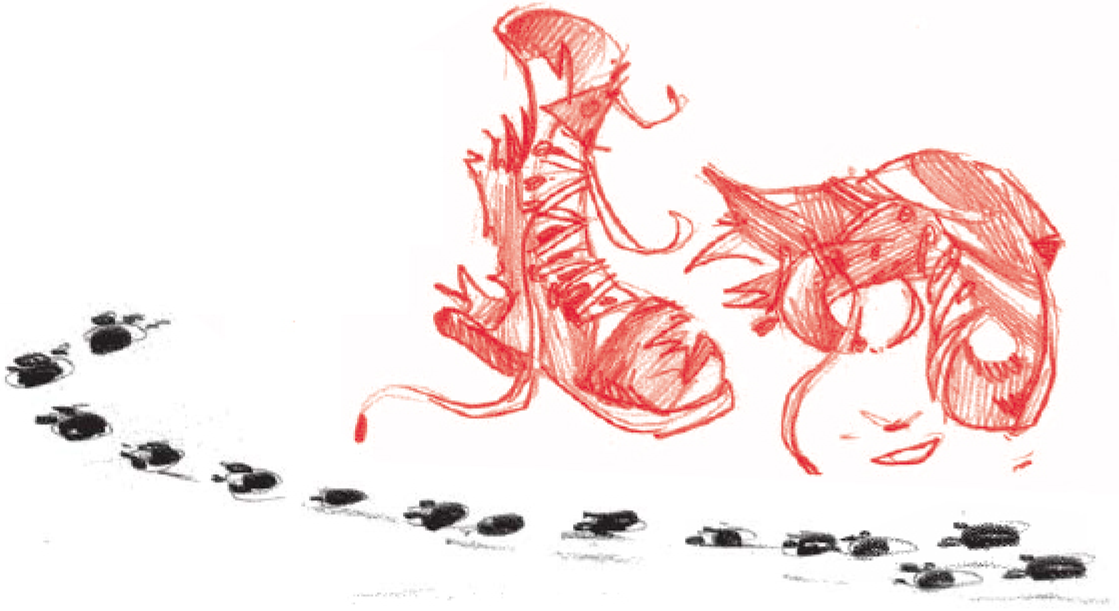
NEW JOURNAL! Bought it today as a treat for myself. Am in need of some quiet journal-style downtime. Have been under much stress. Here are some reasons why:





1. Waaaaaaaay too much schoolwork. Granted, since I am homeschooling myself this year, I have only myself to blame.
2. Must also factor in a great deal of kicking. Kicking myself, that is, for said insane course load.
3. Raven is in dire need of a tune-up, which I don’t have time to give her.

4. So she’s glitching out all over the place. Uncontrolled blinking, unexplained smiling, unwelcome bursts of laughter…and the other day I walked in on her using my phone! Had to remind her that phones are for humans, not golems.
5. Lack of liquid black rock = far less weird science in my life than I’d like.
6. The persistent haunting feeling that, by now, I really should know how to summon said liquid black rock is not helping the general mood, either.
7. ~~Half-completed~~ Barely begun lab projects are piling up and adding to the general chaos of my room.
8. And instead of snuggling peacefully, bringing me snack treats, or completing assignments for me, my cats are only adding to the craziness.
9. For example: Miles woke me in the middle of the day by barfing in my ear. I mean literally IN MY EAR. Ewwwwwwwwwww.
10. Sabbath chewed Mom’s fave pair of combat boots to gooey shreds. Had to bury them in the yard before she found out.
11. Mystery has developed some type of feline obsessive-compulsive disorder and will only eat her kibble if I hand-feed it to her 13 pieces at a time.
12. NeeChee has come down with some variety of mange, or possibly scabies. He’s scratching like crazy and leaving fur all over the place.
13. SOMEONE is thinking outside the box. Cat box, that is.



At least the end of the school year is only a week away. Hallelujah and all that. Have really enjoyed homeschooling myself, but constant self-discipline has been more of a pain in the cheeks than I expected. Am soooooooo ready for the summer and some irresponsible mischief-style use of my time for a change! Now, if only Mom would let up on her family-togetherness-style summer planning, I might actually have some fun. She is making a huge deal out of me finishing my first actual year of school and has been coming up with celebration plans. Unfortunately, her latest celebration idea is for us to take a long cruise to someplace sunny. WITHOUT my cats. WITHOUT my golem. Does she know me AT ALL??? Needless to say, I would gnaw off a limb to avoid this kind of "celebration." I know she's just trying to plan something fun, but she hasn't really considered that her idea of fun and mine are not super compatible. We will both be happier if we take separate vacations like we do every year!!! Am thinking of sending her off on this cruise by herself while I stay behind and "take care of" the house. Or if she prefers to stay home, I'm cool with being the one to leave town. As long as my summer is A) unsupervised, B) unstructured, and C) mischief-packed, I'm good.

Of course, it goes without saying that I would also REALLY like my summer to include the summoning of black rock. If I've learned one thing from Great-Aunt Millie in all those sessions of Strange Family 101, it's that, well, the general non-Strange population is helpless against a Strange girl who's been fully trained in Mischief and Mayhem by her Dead Dark Auntie.

But if I've learned a SECOND thing from Great-Aunt Millie, it's that some of my coolest ancestors had a flow of liquid black rock under their control—black rock that was tied to some pretty awe-inspiring talents. Am really hoping that black rock (and an accompanying amazing talent) will be mine soon as well!

Have been trying super hard to summon my own supply for months, though, with no success. Since I have no idea HOW to summon it, my efforts so far have entailed some creative visualization, a dash of interpretive dance, a smattering of fake-magical words, and a lot of intense facial contortions.

Up to now, the only thing I've succeeded in summoning is a strong sense of foolishness.

SIGH. I have been so flamdrabbling obsessed with the black rock lately, and where has that gotten me? Maybe a more Zen approach is what I need. Focus on the mischief, and the black rock will follow!

Yeah. Let's hope it is that easy.

Will have to impress Mom with one last eXtreme burst of self-organization and self-education so that she is wowed into agreeing to leave the rest of the summer entirely up to me. Self-regulation and self-guidance are WAY more self-pleasing when done for self-serving purposes. Am patting self on back for this plan!!!!

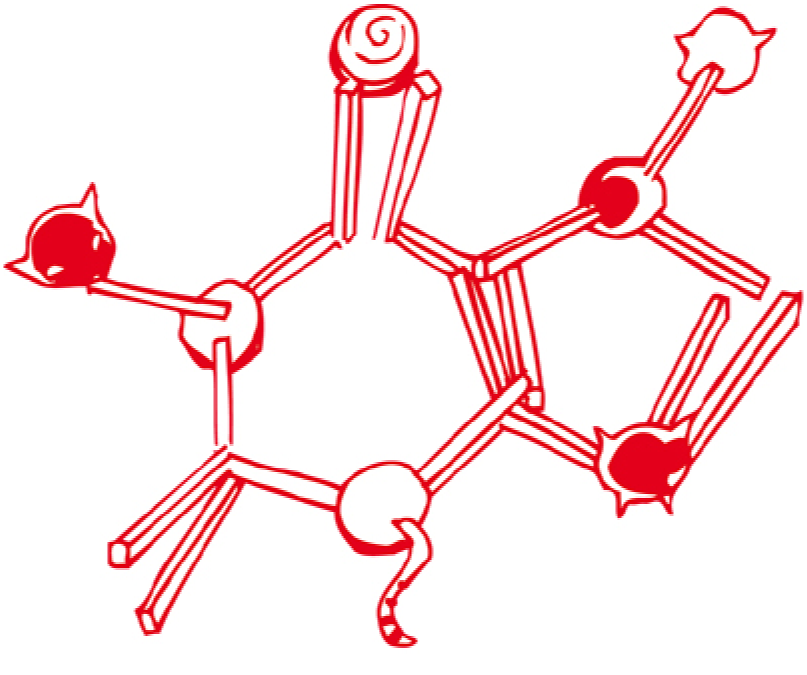
Later

NeeChee has just come looking for snuggles. Poor guy, his coat is looking family-shamingly shabby. Will have to get him under the microscope and see exactly which parasitic species is giving him grief so I can whip up an antidote.

Am now feeling kind of sorry for my misbehaving cats. They probably just miss me. Have not been able to spend long, lazy hours with them because of my self-inflicted heavy workload. Well, the end is in sight, and soon I can make it up to them. Have informed them they are included in—they are ESSENTIAL to—my summer-mischief-style plans.

Later

Here is my plan for final projects that are sure to dazzle Mom into leaving me alone all summer:

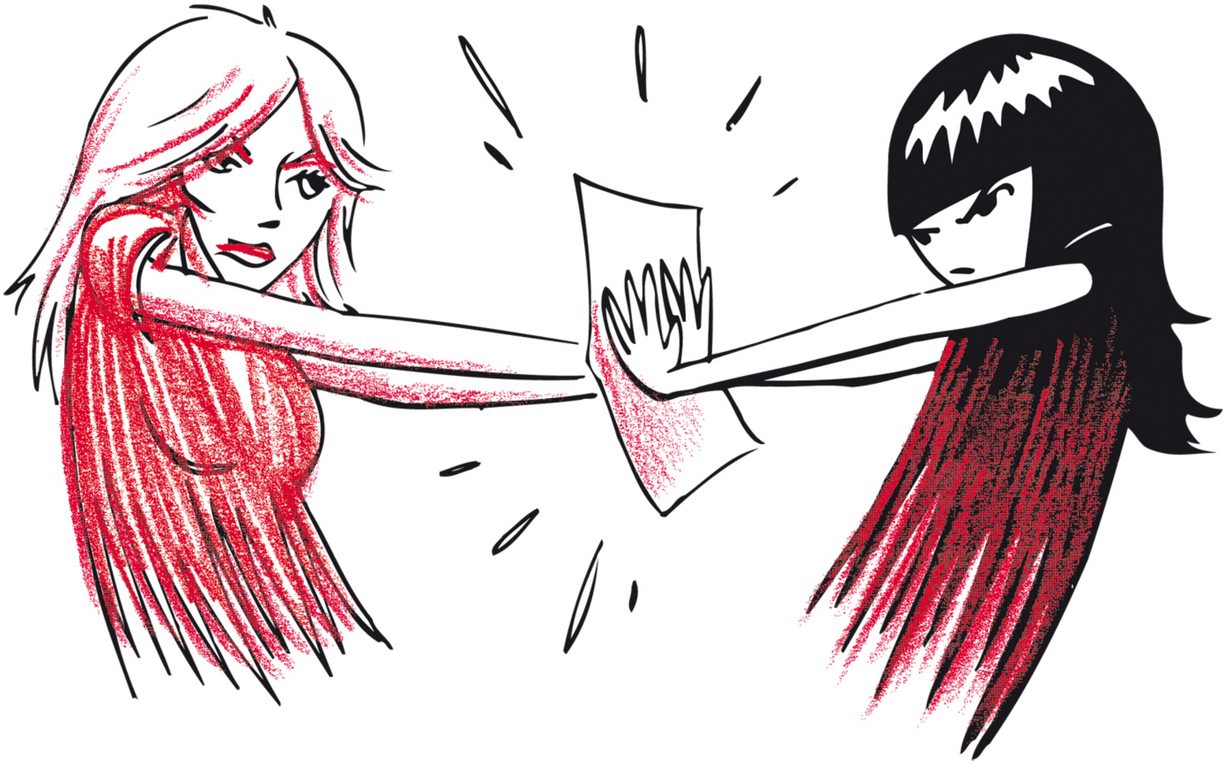


1. Current Developments in Particle Physics: One-paragraph summary of my learnings—in words of one syllable. (MUCH harder than it sounds!!)
2. How-To with Glue: Matchstick model of a caffeine molecule.
3. Golem Programming: Get Raven to respond in complete, well-enunciated sentences. Am tired of “Iono.”
4. Basics of Magic: Sleight-of-hand performance. No sleeves allowed!!!
5. Great Poetry of the 13th Century: Original epic saga in the style of the time.
6. Advanced Practicum in Krav Maga: Spar with Raven.
7. Plant Identification 101: Demonstrate my knowledge of plant species with a thought experiment (thought invention?)—a heinous crossbreed that would be delightful but totally unethical to create for real.
8. Complex Numbers: Performance of original music expressing a complex number of my choice.
9. Skateboarding 223 (Deck Modifications): Exposition on concept, design, and development of my latest enhancement—heel-activated jet propulsion for super speedy getaways.

10. Independent Filmmaking 101: Independent film on topic of my choice, independently filmed.
11. Locksport 445: Demo of advanced key-bumping techniques.
12. Fingerpainting: Family portrait with dead Great-Aunts.
13. History of the Strange Family 101: An evening of quality time with my favorite ancestor (MOM)—OK, yes, this was a strategic decision. I'm going for the heartstrings here!

Later

Have presented the above list to Mom. She was suitably impressed with all items except number 13. She says that as much as she'd like some quality time with me, this does not qualify as an accomplishment/it is far below my capabilities/I am clearly attempting to use emotional manipulation to get a good grade/I should not expect school credit for hanging out with my mother/blah blah blah. She is pushing for a research paper. I am pushing back equally hard, pointing out the backbreaking effort involved in items one through twelve, and the fact that I'd've done about 1/13th of this work if I'd gone to regular school. Mom countered that I'd've also been 13 times more bored and irritated with my life if I'd gone to regular school. SIGH. Will try to come up with a suitable compromise.



Just another friendly mother-daughter battle over the merits and drawbacks of research papers.

Later

Visited Great-Aunt Millie in the attic to get her input on a good final assignment for Strange 101. She was too busy howling in the rafters to pay me any mind. Recent development, the howling. She started up one night after I complained that as poltergeists go, she was far too mild-mannered.

Anyway, it's rarely a good plan to ask her anything during the witching hour. Will come back when hauntin' time is over.

Later

Have subjected NeeChee to a thorough inspection under the microscope. Have not found any parasites. Have given him a good bathing and instructed him to take it easy on himself. Have also given Miles some stomach-soothing homeopathic remedies, reminded Sabbath that chewing is properly done on chew toys, and divided Mystery's kibble into neat piles of exactly 13 pieces each. Am hoping this takes care of my cat-mothering duties for the night. I REALLY need to get some serious schoolwork done, and feline distractions are the last thing I need. Am realizing that while items four, six, and eleven on my list will be easy (are basically already done, in fact), the rest will take much work and preparation. Snarvblots!

Much Later

OK. Have completed my caffeine molecule model. It took 4.6 hours. Am exhausted and the sun is almost up. Going to bed.

May 9

Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work.
—Gustave Flaubert

Am finishing up an early dinner, since my final class of Strange Family 101 starts in ten minutes. Aunt Millie has requested that I bring Raven with me tonight. Odd. Maybe she wants some heavy furniture moved or lead pipes bent into fanciful shapes.

Later

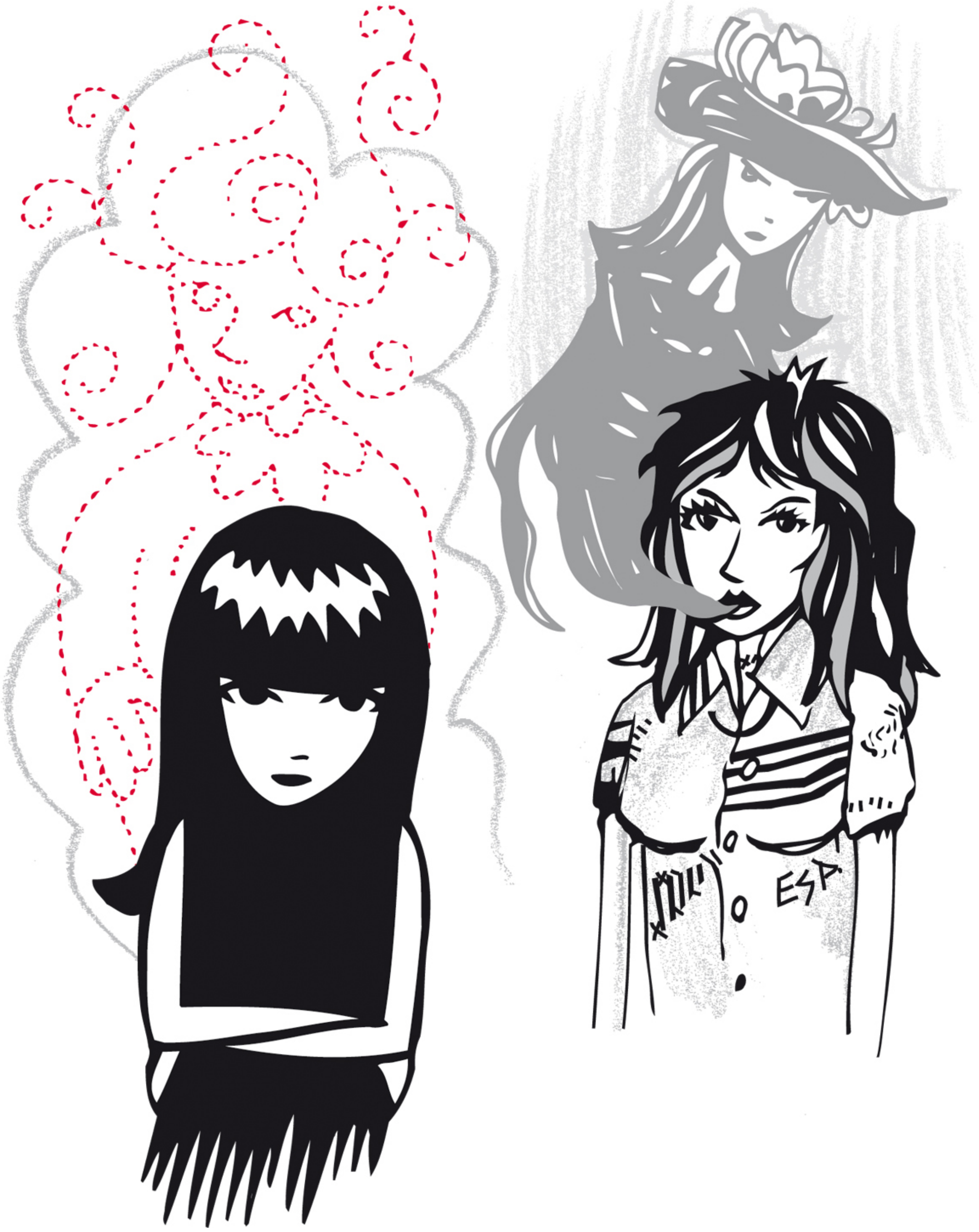
Have just had THEE most unusual session of Strange Family 101—and THAT'S saying a lot!

Am actually kinda stunned by the things I have seen and heard in the past hour…but will do my best to put it all down on paper as it happened.

Here goes:

OK, to start with—Great-Aunt Millie did NOT need Raven for her strength of muscle but for her weakness of mind. What I mean is, she needed my golem as an empty shell for ANOTHER one of my Dead Dark

Great-Aunts to inhabit. (Clapjax…I just LOVE that I can write sentences like that about my family!!!) Yeah. So. For the past hour, Raven has not been Raven at all but Great-Aunt Emma!



Strangest family gathering EVARRR.

After I was done being surprised to hear Aunt Emma’s voice coming out of my golem’s mouth, and once we’d all finished the obligatory small talk, our conversation turned to my favorite topic: my ancestral treasure and the legacy of the Dark Aunts—the mysterious, magical, majestic, liquid black rock.

If only I could have reported that Aunt Millie’s lessons in Dark Girl history hadn’t been in vain. That my visit to Aunt Emma’s home, and my experiences with HER black rock, had been of some use. That it wasn’t for nothing that I traveled two hundred years back in time to coach Aunt Lily to master black rock and to keep Uncle Boris away from it.

I couldn’t report any of that, of course.

Great-Aunt Emma: Emily, let’s get to the heart of the matter here. Am I correct in surmising that you have not yet summoned the black rock?

Me: [Hanging my head.] You’re correct. I really have tried, Aunt Emma. I chanted some poetry, and meditated in the vulture pose, and even went on a fairly embarrassing vision quest, which DID give me some great material for a dream sequence, if I ever make a coming-of-age movie that features a wisecracking tarantula wearing an Elvira wig…but no black rock yet.

GAE: This is of great concern to me, and to all your other Dark Aunts.

Me: So…do you know for sure that I SHOULD be able to summon it? I mean, not every Dark Girl got control of black rock, right?

Great-Aunt Millie: Youuuuu arrre riiight, Emmillly…I nnnneverrr summmmonnnnned it myssssellllf.

GAE: True. But we have reason to believe that you should be able to.

Me: [Excited.] Really? Why?

GAE: Because you are no ordinary Dark Girl, Emily. You’re the THIRTEENTH Dark Girl.

Me: Well, aside from being a cool number, what does that mean, exactly?

GAE: Every thirteen generations, the black rock becomes unstable. Up for grabs, as you young people say. If a Dark Girl does not succeed in harnessing its power for herself, control of it may shift.

Me: Shift…to whom?

GAE: To a Shady Uncle! And if that should happen, black rock will belong to THAT side of the family for the next thirteen generations.

Me: But I don’t even have an uncle. Who…oh, wait a minute. Was Aunt Lily’s Uncle Boris a Shady Uncle?

GAM: Heeeeeee was innnndeeeeed!

Me: So I guess some of Boris’ descendants are Shady Uncles too. What about that annoying jerkwad I’m always having to cleverly hornswaggle? Y’know, Attikol? Is he one of them?

GAM: Moooore thannn likellllly.

Me: Then help me out here, Dark Aunties…HOW do I summon it before he does?

GAE: [Frustrated.] I don’t know. What works for one Dark Girl will not work for another, we know that much.

ME: What else do we know?

GAE: Unfortunately, that is the extent of our knowledge, though Aunt Millie and I have long suspected—or hoped, if you will—that our eldest aunts may have left some sort of instructions for the thirteenth Dark Girl.

ME: Can we ask them?

GAE: I've tried, my dear! But they have gone on into the great darkness, as we too will someday. How often have I called out to them! But all in vain, for there is never any response.

ME: So they're, like, gone forever?

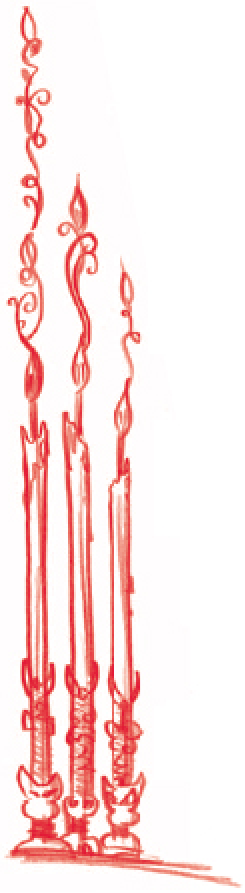
GAM: Nnnnot necesssssssarily. They returrrrrrned to wellllllcome meeeee, and Lilllllly, and Emmmmmmmma to our full powerrrrrrrs.

GAE: And they will likely do the same for you, Emily…

ME: [Sighing.] Yeah. WHEN and IF I summon the black rock. I really hate to be letting you down like this. If it helps any, as far as Attikol's concerned, you can chill on that front. He may be my ~~archenemy~~, but the guy is not bright!

GAE: He need not be bright, Emily, as long as he is SHADY. Remember, if he ever once summons the black rock, your chance at it will be lost forever!

GAM: Annnnd it willll be lossst to the next thirrrrrteeen Darrrrk Girrrrlsss as welllllll!



Crazy stuff, huh? Anyway, we had to wrap up around that point because Great-Aunt Emma was feeling the strain of manifesting her spirit in Raven's body. Before she disappeared, she promised to do her best to keep searching for any kind of information that might help me summon black rock. Am not holding my breath, though. I mean, no one gave her or Aunt Lily step-by-step instructions. They summoned it because THEY found their special way to summon it. Now that my last class of Family Strange is over, it's really up to me to figure out what that might be for me!

All the same, I can understand why my Dead Dark Aunts are sorta peering nervously over my shoulder. I mean, I want my black rock more than anything in the world. And as a close second, I REALLY want to find out what my unique, black-rock-driven talent might be. Aunt Emma built with it, Aunt Amelia painted with it, Aunt Lily used it to heal…What am I gonna do with it? Channel it through a guitar into virtuospastic aural thrashings? Weave an epic macramé Earth-cozy that will block out the sun forever? Surf tsunamis of it to the moon?

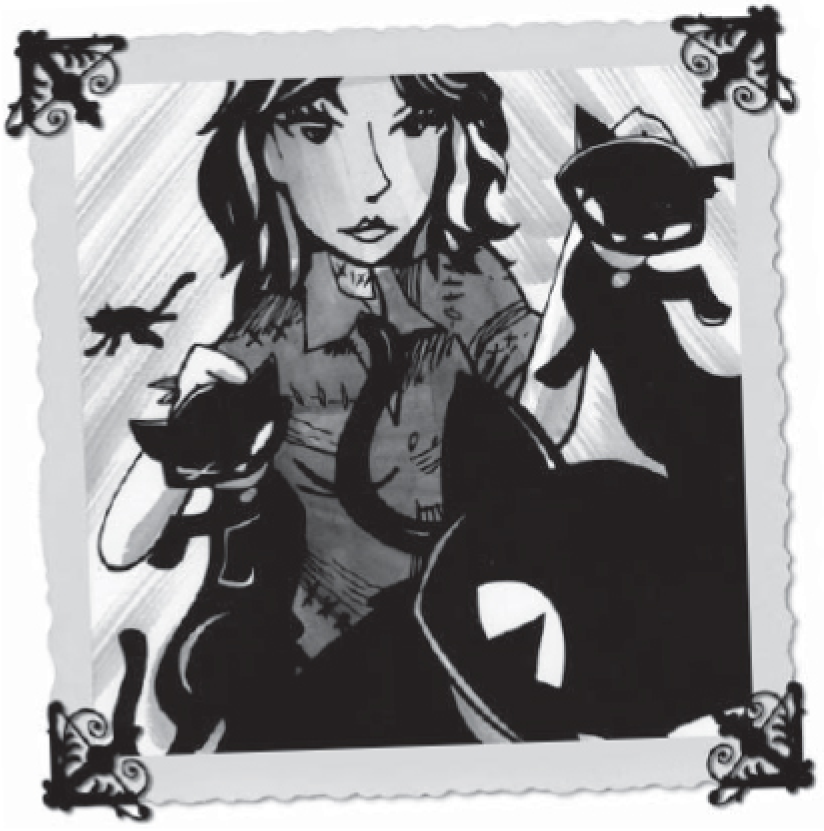
When I think of what could happen instead, it gives me the super-creepy-horrors. Lose black rock? To lame old Attikol? For the next 13 generations? It just CAN'T happen that way!

Not sure what I can do about it, aside from trying again (and again, and again, and again…) to summon the stuff.

Later

Since frantic summoning has produced no results, am actually trying the Zen approach. Am working on my final projects instead. Maybe occupying my conscious mind with arduous schoolwork will free up some hidden summoning powers!

Have assigned Raven to constant cat supervision. Of course, that only works so well, since there are four misbehaving felines and just one of her. And she is unfortunately prone to waywardness herself, though due more to lack of mind than mischief. Let's also not forget that each cat is approximately 333% more intelligent than Raven. Well, she can at least keep them out of earshot, so I can get some work done! Have exiled them all from the house until daybreak.



The Posse and their babysitter!

Later

Dude. I should exile the cats and Raven from the house more often!!! Have been peacefully working on item number eight on my list. I came up with the coolest melody expressing the imaginary component of my complex number. Am getting so much accomplished, I may be able to knock out number five as well. I just had the most amazing idea for my epic saga! It'll open with a

—Some kind of commotion downstairs, more later—

Later

Oh gazcakes. Raven has just been escorted home by the police. Apparently she followed the cats out to the construction site of the new shopping mall, where guards apprehended her for trespassing and not wearing a hard hat. Disconcerted by her blank stare and lack of conversational skills, they called in the police. Luckily I had the foresight to stitch our address across the front of her shirt in bright red yarn. Thus, Mom was woken out of a deep sleep and forced to have a discussion with a certain Officer Pleasance regarding Raven and her special needs, especially her special need for full-time supervision. Their conversation was far too long for me to capture entirely, but it went a little something like this:

Officer Pleasance: But ma’am, what I am trying to determine here is, is she or isn’t she normal?

Mom: [Yawning ferociously.] Define “normal.”

OP: Um, able to answer questions in complete sentences?

M: Oh, c’mon. Izz four a.m.! Who can do THAT?

Sheezzles! And the worst part is that OF COURSE Mom is holding ME responsible for Raven’s misbehavior—just because I made her!—and has asked me to keep her indoors. Actually, that’s NOT the worst part. The worst part is that I can’t remember my epic-saga inspiration. Am halting efforts to complete the List for now. Am feeling too stressed and put-upon to do quality work. Instead I am headed to the basement for a soul-soothing session in my sensory-deprivation chamber.

Later

Sensory-deprivation session was just the thing to get me going again. Have now completed items number one and number seven. Am regretting my compulsion to do all things in groups of 13. Would be through the list MUCH faster if I favored the number two.

Later

Am working hard on number ten and feeling really aggravated by how difficult it is to shoot a decent movie by myself. It’s just not right: Writers can write alone, painters can paint alone, but there are some pretty severe limitations to what a filmmaker can accomplish if she’s determined to truly be independent…i.e., not to involve any other humans. I mean, cats are great company on the set, but they’re very poor cinematographers, they hate wearing costumes, and they absolutely refuse to learn their lines.

Of course, a major part of my problem here is the KIND of film I want to make. Left entirely to my own resources, I guess I could shoot a decent movie of, say, my feline Posse up to their usual hijinks. Or Raven sitting around with her mouth open. Or Great-Aunt Millie busy a-hauntin'. But that's not what I see when I close my eyes. I see continents sinking below the waves; I see mitochondria prank-calling galaxies; I see giant purple vampire lobsters battling zombie prom queens…you know, ~~COOL~~ stuff.

SIGH!

Sun is coming up. Will revisit the List tomorrow!

May 10

Emily is the mother of invention.

—Ancient Latin aphorism (paraphrased)

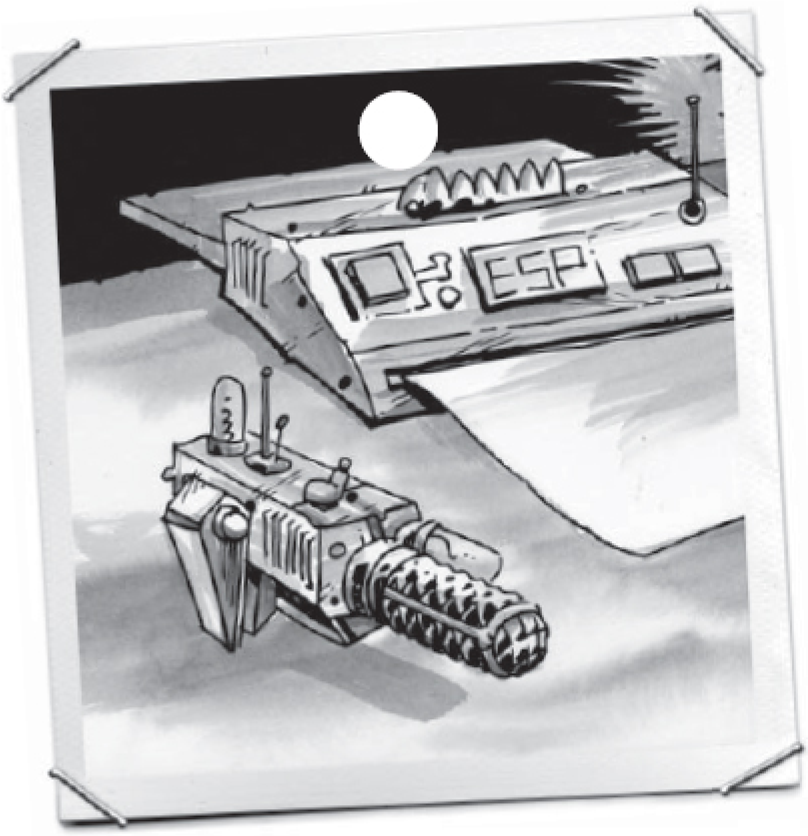
Am not working on the List. Am in need of more soul-soothing. Have decided that tinkering around in my lab with various inventions-in-progress will help me feel less aggravated and more productive; therefore, in a roundabout way, letting me get MORE work done on the List.

Thus I am hard at work on my latest creation: the TranscriptoSpy!

This is a lovely little labor-saving device that records and prints conversations for me so all I have to do is tear off the transcripts and paste them in my diary. Writing them out by hand is so tiresome, and I end up taking too many shortcuts. Not good! I mean…just think where we'd be today without good transcription. We'd probably think the most important speeches of history went "a little something like this":

Abraham Lincoln:	Four score and seven years ago…civil war…fitting and proper…died in vain…Yeah.
Martin Luther King, Jr.:	I am happy to join with you today…I have a dream…curvaceous peaks of California…Yeah.

Clearly this is unacceptable. I need to record the facts, the nuances, the little details of what people say, if only so I can hold it against them later!



TranscriptoSpy and remote printer!

Later

Have completed the TranscriptoSpy! Or, to be accurate, 13 of them. Have installed them in useful locations all over the house, including one soldered onto Raven’s neck and one hot-glued onto this very diary. Not only am I never handwriting a conversation again—I will have perfectly accurate transcripts of conversations that I’m not even present for. YeHeHessssss!

Here is the first conversation to come through on the feed:

Mom
Ravin’, eye thought eye tolled ewe two dew the laundry!

Raven
Uhhhhhhhhhhh…

M.
And wear is my sell phone?

R.
Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…

M.
Owe my goodness. If ewe can’t manage too answer me, wood ewe please, at least, clothes yore mouth? Yore creeping me out!

AHHAHHAHHHHA.
Am recalibrating.

Later

Calibrations are done, and the TranscriptoSpy is transcribing much better English now. Am very glad I took the time to complete this device! Am now looking through my archive of invention ideas to see if I can save myself any more time and/or continue to avoid the List by messing about in my lab instead. Ideally, I would find an invention-in-progress that relates to every unfinished List item. Then, paradoxically, I could COMPLETE my work while simultaneously AVOIDING my work. Will award myself many extra-credit points if I pull this off!

Later

OK—I may not be able to knock out Epic Poetry with an invention, but Independent Filmmaking is gonna be easy. I am going to build a ThoughtCorder!!!!!!

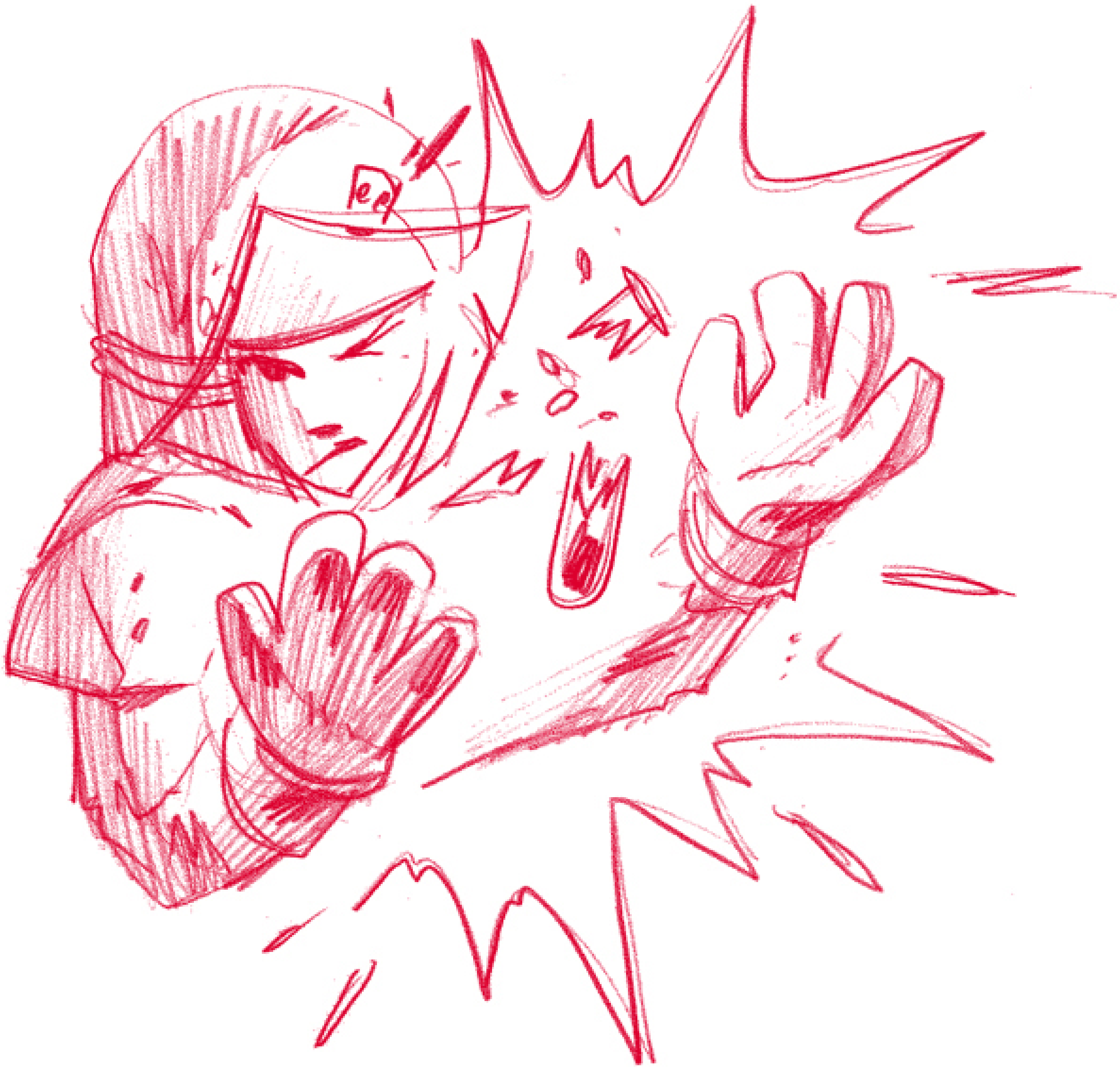
This little item is (or will be) a BRILLIANT device that…yep… RECORDS MY THOUGHTS. I should then be able to edit and project them, just like regular film footage, and capture the wondrous grandeur of my imagination for all time! The only hitch is my total lack of liquid black rock. Every last drop of Great-Aunt Emma's black rock has been used, whether for critical purposes (e.g., powering my Time-Out Machine or reuniting the severed halves of my personality) or trivial ones (e.g., making black dresses even blacker). Not even any dried flakes left to scrape together. Am regretting (as I knew I would) that I turned down Great-Aunt Lily's offer to send me back to my own century with a big jar of HER black rock. But I guess that's how things stand until I can summon some of my own.

That doesn't mean the ThoughtCorder is out of the question…it's just gonna be tougher than it was when I had black rock. That stuff always seemed to bridge the gap for me between the arduous building and testing and finally getting a seemingly impossible teleportation/levitation/duplication device to work. Luckily, this whole drattzy self-homeschooling business has gotten me well-accustomed to long hours of difficult work. Cuz it's gonna take a few (or a few dozen) before I have my ThoughtCorder.

—But enough of this already! Back to the lab!

Later

Minor disaster. 13 milligrams of mercury fulminate exploding in my face was NOT what I really needed. Luckily I was wearing full riot gear. Still, my eyebrows are slightly scorched. Eardrums somewhat deafened. Cats are hiding under the bed…it's their turn to be irked with ME, I guess!



Small pothole on the road to success.

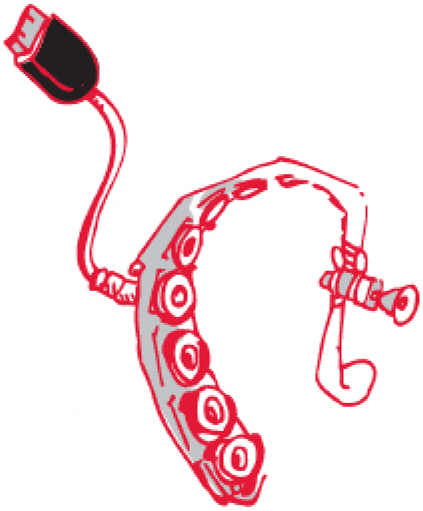
Later

Making progress! The recording mechanism is complete—that was the hard part. Had to scavenge some components from various older inventions, cook up a huge batch of aggrandamated mixolydium, and regulate my phasing spectroscope six times just to get to this point. Am taking a little break before I start building the projector!

MUCH Later

Oh framjoozles of joy! It took most of the night—but the magnificent ThoughtCorder is complete!

Have not yet embarked on making my original independent film—but in the process of testing my extraordinary invention, I've already crafted the following satirical cinematic masterpieces:



The ThoughtCorder!

1. 2013
2. Requiem for a Nightmare
3. There Will Be Even More Blood
4. Lies About Cats and Dogs
5. Girls in Black
6. You Only Live Nine Times
7. Where the Wild Things Bleed
8. Eternal Midnight of the Creatively Cluttered Mind
9. No Country for Old Cats
10. The 13th Sense
11. Dances with Zombies

12. Three Men and a Zombie
13. How to Train Your ZombieAlienNinjaYetiSpider Vampire-MonkeyDragon

Note to self: Should add Satirical Cinematic Masterpieces to my course load next term. Seeing as how the course work is already done.

May 11

This is the strangest life I've ever known.
—Jim Morrison

OH GRAZZLES

SUCH GOOD NEWS

A VERRRRRRRRRY interesting item arrived in today's mail. Here it is in all its glory:

Our dear great-niece:

How we wish we could deliver this wonderful piece of news to you in person! But, alas, it must be from beyond the grave. Nevertheless, this is a momentous and happy occasion. Now that you have completed your studies of the History of the Strange Family, you have earned your full inheritance—control over the black rock! We salute your hard work and perseverance!

> ***Your personal source of black rock lies in Seasidetown. Lose no time in traveling hence and laying claim to your birthright!***
>
> ***May your deepest wish be granted!***
>
> ***Many blessings from***
> ***your dead Great-Aunts***

HOODLYHOODLYHOODLYHOOOOOOOO

BLACK ROCK!!!!!!!!!!!

I guess Great-Aunt Emma was right! These must be the instructions she hoped the Elder Aunts would send! Huh…they could've just had Great-Aunt Millie tell me. But I'm sure they have their reasons. Anyway—I've got plans to make! More later!

Later

Have shown the letter to Mom and Great-Aunt Millie. ~~The conversation went a little bit like this~~ Silly me. The conversation went EXACTLY like this, thanks to my lovely TranscriptoSpy.

Me
So you didn't know anything about this?

Great-Aunt Millie
(Real grumpy.)
Theeeeeey neverrrrrrrr tellllllll meeeeeeeee annnnythinnng.

Me
There, there. Well, so, Patti, looks like I'm making a field trip to Seasidetown!

Mom
Um, can I just clarify one thing? You're not going to 1790s Seasidetown again, are you?

Me
Oh becheezles no. I mean, this letter's postmarked two days ago. And anyway, I want to check out present-day Seasidetown for a change.

M.
[Heaving sigh of relief.] Great, cuz, you know, I worry when you go time traveling. That whole parallel-universe thing really freaks me out.

Me
Yeah, it CAN be kinda unsettling, knowing that I could change some teeny aspect of the past, and then come home to a world where I have four WHITE cats, or my name is Cheery Sparkledaisy instead of Emily Strange, or—

M.
I was thinking more along the lines of you accidentally wiping out the human race or something of that magnitude. Not that you'd ever do THAT…

Me
Well, no. Not
ACCIDENTALLY.

M.
Hmph!

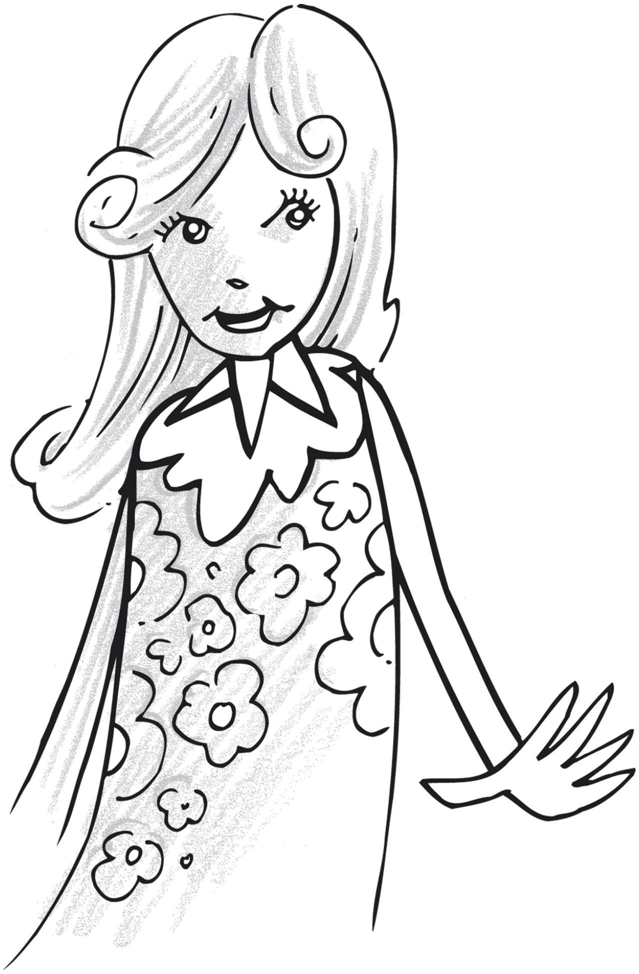
Me
Anyhoozles, nice chatting with you two, but I have trunks to pack.

M.
Not so fast. Doesn't it bother you that Great-Aunt Millie wasn't aware of this letter? Or that you'd need to go to Seasidetown to get your inheritance?

Me
Well, not really. I mean, how many Dead Dark Aunts does it take to bestow an inheritance and write a 113-word letter?

[Dropping my voice respectfully.]
Y'know, like Aunt Millie said…maybe they DON'T tell her anything.

M.
Umm…right. Well, maybe I worry too much, but what about that Attikol guy you've told me about? Aren't you worried he might be looking for black rock, too?



Cheery Sparkledaisy!
Good thing she's only hypothetical.

Me
Oh, Patti, Patti, Patti. If there were even the tiniest threat from Attikol, the smallest evil thought in his little mind, Cousin Jakey would have warned me right away! I've told you how perfect a spy he is for me. He works in

Attikol’s medicine show, so he’s always in close contact with the guy. And he’s a VERY sensitive psychic. Best of all, he DESPISES Attikol. But if it makes you feel any better, I’ll talk to him and make sure things are cool. Cool?

M.
I don’t know, E. I just don’t feel good about this.

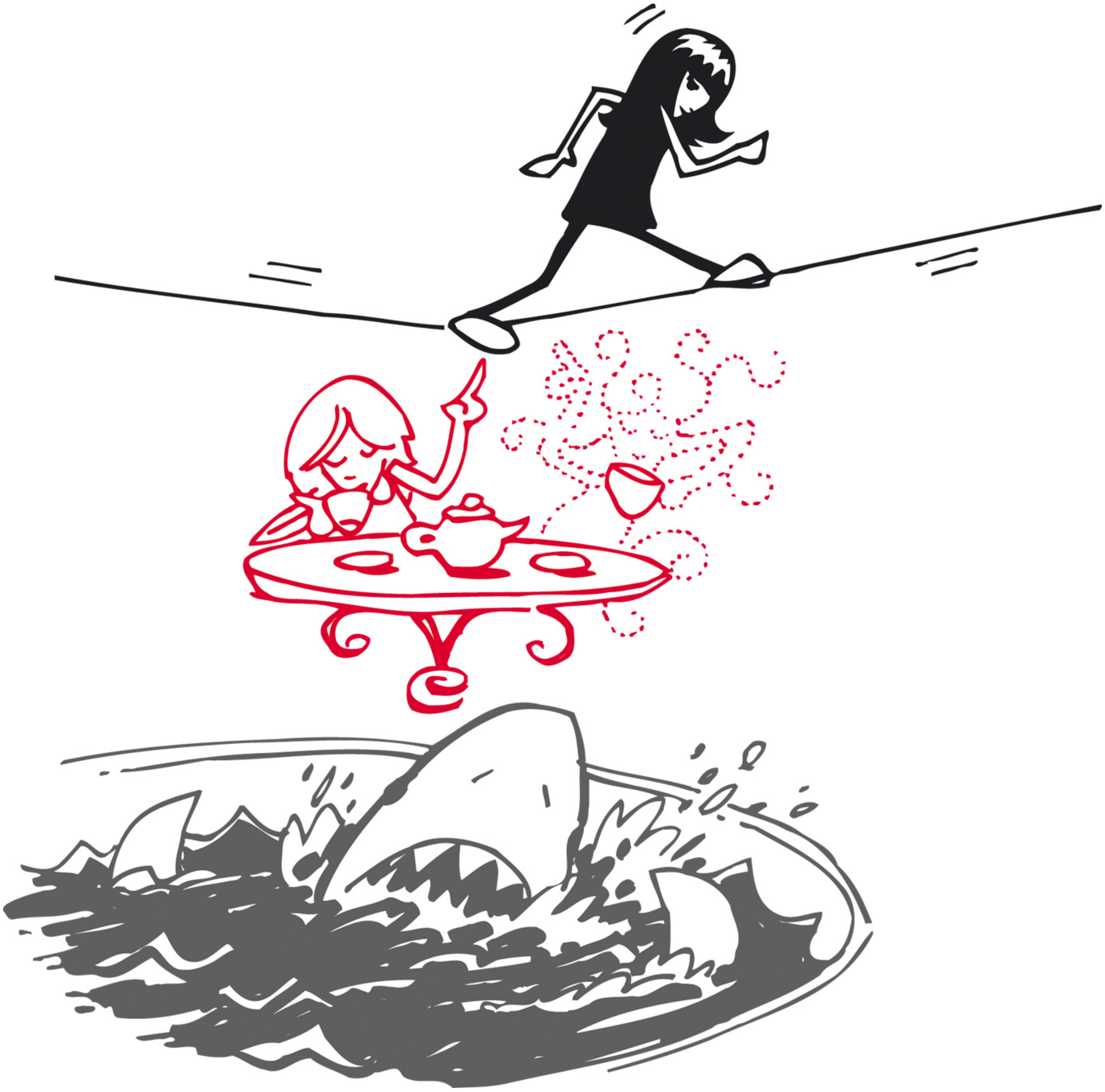
Me
[Sighing.]
You’re gonna make me play the Dark Girl card, aren’t you?

M.
I guess I am.

Me
Great-Aunt Millie, back me up here…aren’t unsupervised excursions an essential part of my education as a Dark Girl?

G.A.M
Yessssss…and I doooo belieeeve you arrrre meant to goooooo. But lissssten to yourrrrr motherrrrr, Emmillllly, and uuuuse cautionnnnnnn!

Me
Gahhhh! You two. Did you both lose all sense of adventure when you turned fourteen?



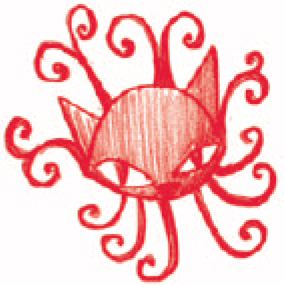
Later

Have worked everything out with Mom. She has agreed to my (UNSUPERVISED!) trip to Seasidetown, and I have agreed to do the following: A) update Raven's bodyguard programming, B) get in touch with Jakey to make sure that things are cool and that my ancestral enemy is NOT up to anything nefarious, C) present my accomplishments in classes one through twelve before I leave, and D) complete a project on Strange Family History 101 (due when I get home, thankfully). Luckily, Mom was very impressed with my ThoughtCorder and decided to compromise on her original research paper plan. So my new assignment is to use the ThoughtCorder, with footage based on my experiences in Seasidetown, to document the grand invocation of my inheritance!

Have already sent my psychic "Hey, what's up with Attikol?" out to Jakey, wherever he may be, and am waiting for his call. Am going to work on Raven's bodyguard programming now. No time to lose! BLACK ROCK AWAITS!!!!!!!

Later

Have made reservations at Seasidetown's oldest hotel for May 13–26. Am allowing for twelve and a half days of unsupervised R & R & R (rowdiness & rebellion & reveling in my inheritance) and a half day of work on my documentary film project. Apparently most of the buildings in Seasidetown have been preserved in (or restored to) their Revolutionary-Era splendor, so I should find it much the same town that I saw in the 1790s. Minus my relations, who are long dead. Also, hopefully, minus the deadly white fever. ALSO, hopefully, PLUS modern conveniences like electricity, skateable pavement, drinkable water, and reliable sources of food.



Later

No message from Jakey. Called his phone. Voicemail. Will try again later.

Later

Have been practicing for my Krav Maga exhibition match with Raven and making sure her chauffeur programming is up to snuff. Here's a short excerpt of our session:

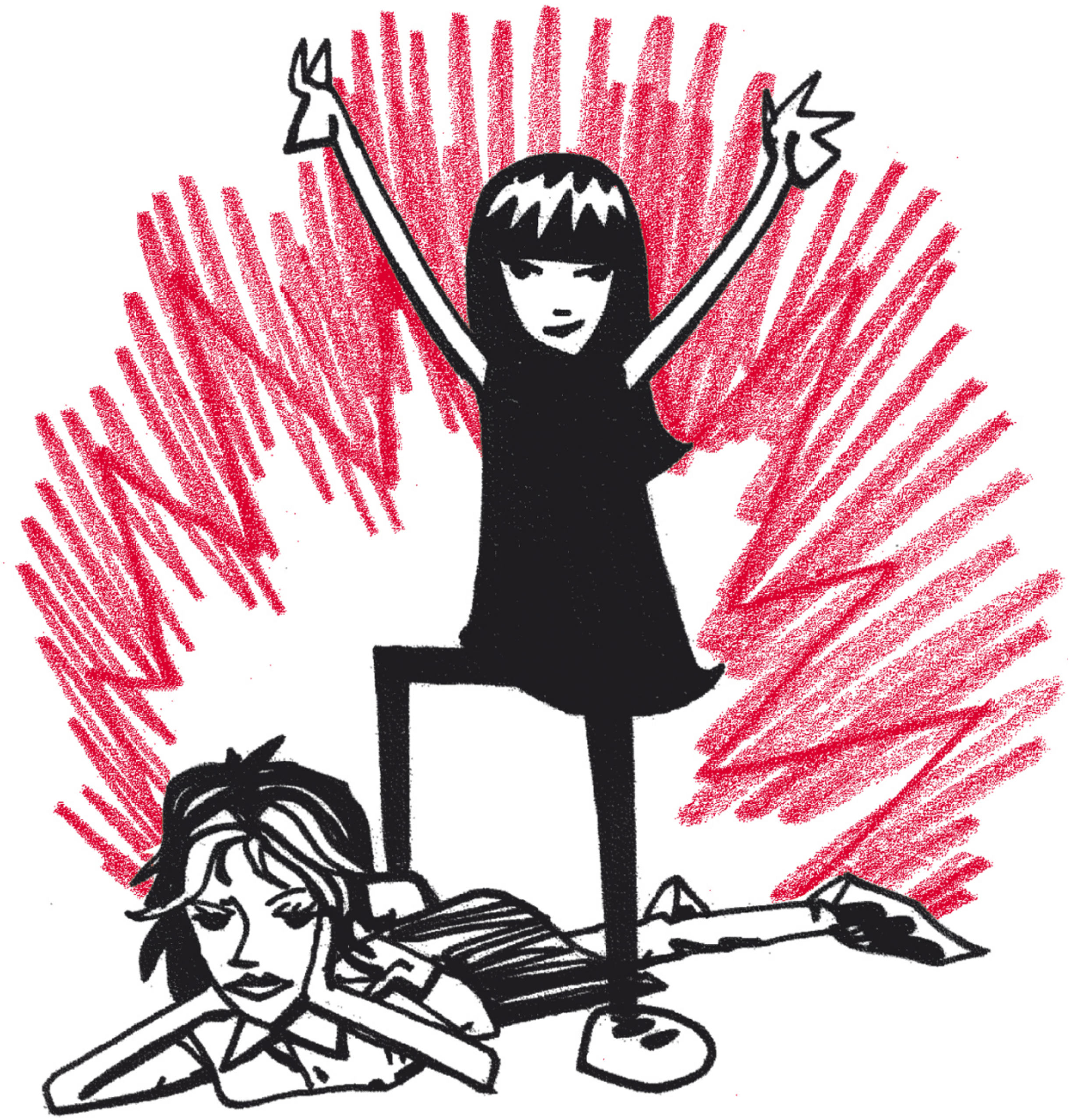
Me
[Eluding Raven’s attempt to put me in a hammerlock.] Raven! In which states can you turn right at a red light?

Raven
[Blocking a punch to the gut.] Uhhhh…all of them?

Me
[Diving between her ankles, twisting lithely, and delivering devastating strike to the left Achilles tendon.]
I mean legally!

R.
[Pinning me to the ground under her foot and delivering rhythmic punches to my upper back.]
Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming!

R.



The victor!

Me
[Squirming free of her foot and pulling her to the ground with a death grip on her knee.]
Correct! And how often do we stop for flea markets and thrift stores?

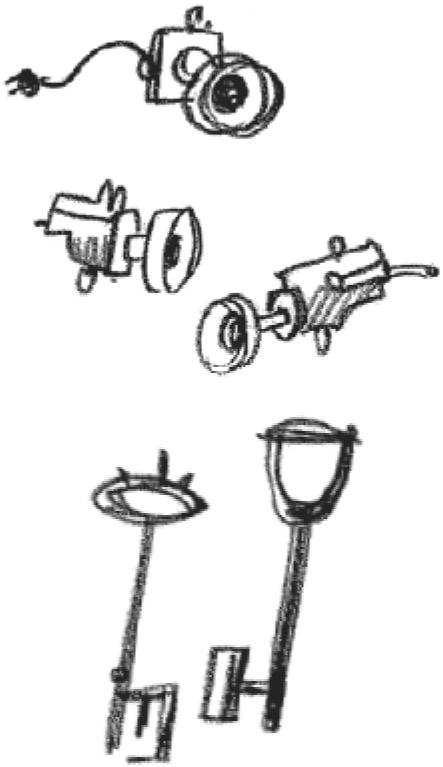
R.

[Displaying palms-up gesture as token of surrender.]
ALWAYS!

Am VERY pleased to hear her giving accurate answers. Complete sentences are soon to follow.

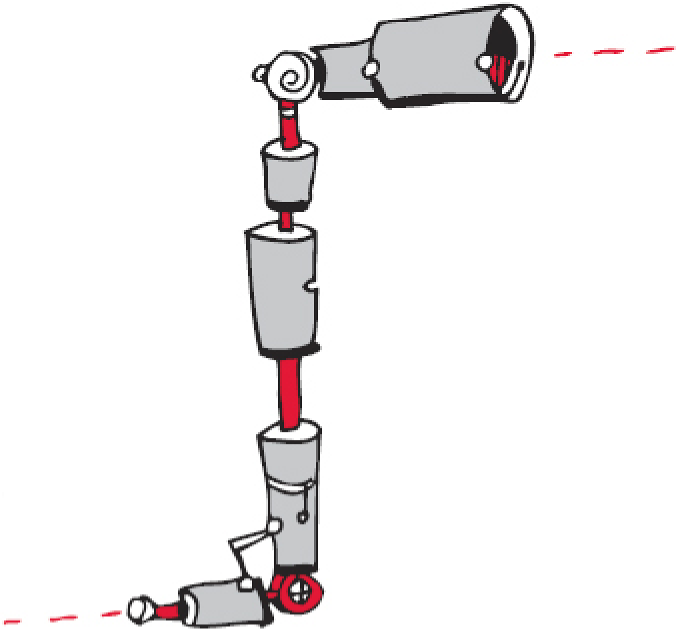
Later

Am packing my trunks with necessary items for the trip, including, but not limited to, the following:



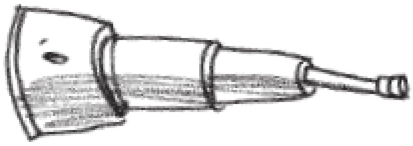
1. 13 identical black dresses
2. Complete set of tools for golem maintenance just in case Raven has a breakdown
3. Box o’ Costumes for myself and Raven (for purposes of General Mischief)
4. Miscellaneous skeleton keys, bump keys, lock picks, tension tools, and other escape-oriented trinkets, in case of unexpected incarceration

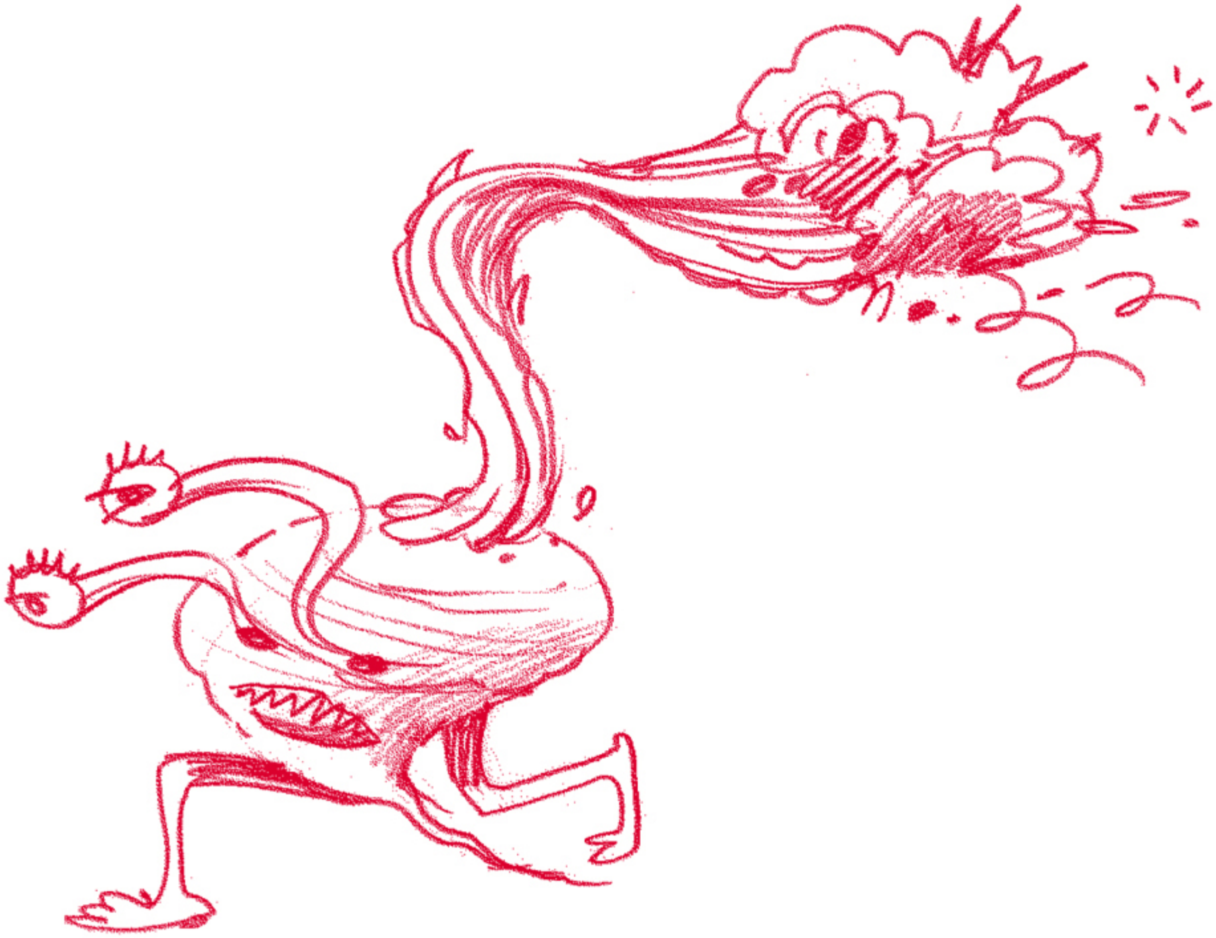
5. Skateboard, plus spare wheels/decks/trucks/bearings/grip tape for any necessary tune-ups
6. Handy spyin' periscope…never leave home without it
7. Inflatable kiddie pool, in case I need to take a long soak in black rock
8. Portable lab…for mad inventing on the go!
9. Snake food (you just never know)
10. Mom's collection of antique punk rock mix tapes from the 1980s, and tape player
11. Many TranscriptoSpies for use in miscellaneous surveillance and prankery
12. Many, many containers of various sizes for black rock storage
13. And of course the magnificent ThoughtCorder! Aside from being essential to my final project, it should come in handy in case the oldest hotel in Seasidetown happens to be equipped with television. Wouldn't want to waste time on THAT nonsense.



Later

The List is now complete through number ten. Excellent achievements. I am especially proud of my first complete original film made entirely with the ThoughtCorder. It tells the poignant story of a giant mutant space manatee who leaves his home in the Andromeda Galaxy to seek his fortune. Along the way, he joins forces with a cantankerous mutant space squirrel, a swaggering mutant space turnip, and a bighearted but foulmouthed mutant space electric can opener to save the galaxy from a bad case of dry rot. Just as the manatee is poised to prevail over his personal insecurities and learn an important lesson on the value of friendship in a triumphant feel-good ending, the turnip goes rabid and eats everybody. Good stuff!!!





Am real pooped. Crawling into bed for the day.

Later

Called Jakey's phone one last time before crashing. Voicemail not accepting messages. This always happens when Professor Ümlaut's Prophylactery and Revue and Uncle Attikol's Deadly Dollhouse roll through a small town, or go behind a hill or something. Jakey will get through by tomorrow, no doubt.

May 12

Half the fun of the travel is the esthetic of lostness.
—Ray Bradbury

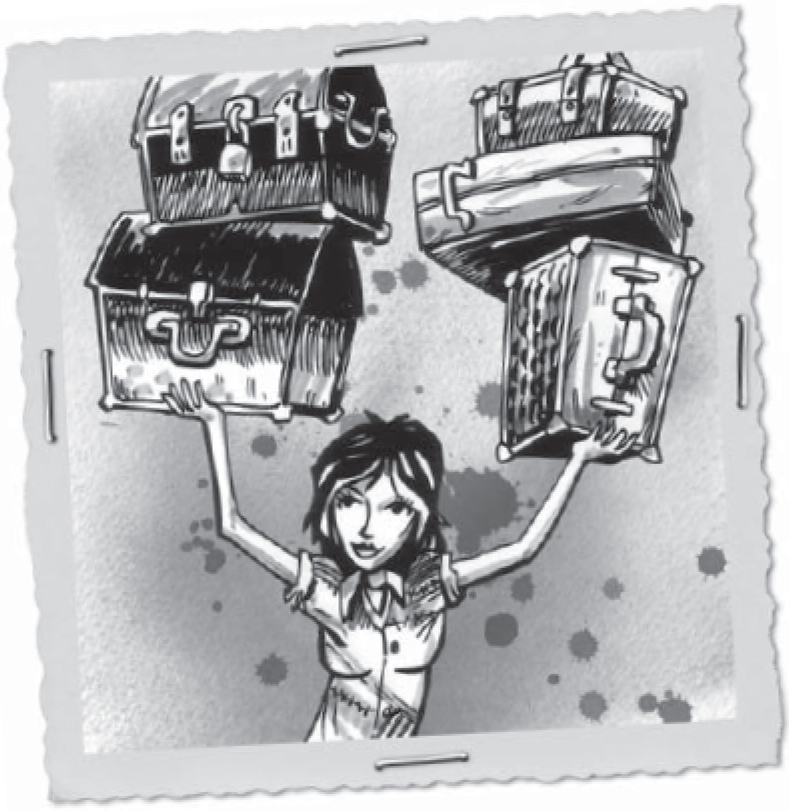
Hauled my tired carcass out of bed before the sun was even properly down and spent the first few hours of the evening completing the last few items on the List. Hit a bit of a roadblock on my fingerpainted family portrait when I realized I don’t really know what Aunt Emma looks like. Yes, I’ve seen a couple old photos, but every time I’ve encountered her in person, she’s been channeling herself through my golem or animating a combination lock or something…which has really confused my mental picture of her. Ended up portraying her as a sort of aged Raven with Patti’s eyes and my hair. Am reasonably happy with the result. The important thing here is that I am done! FINALLY!!!!!! Will be waking Mom up in the wee hours of the morning to present my work. She can then spend the ten days I am gone wading through the mountain of paperwork the county requires for all homeschooled pupils. >Shudder.<

Later

Have finished packing my trunks. They are far too heavy for me to budge. Am grateful once again for my super-strong golem. Raven hefted them like they were feather pillows and threw them in the back of the van. We are all set to take off the moment my Final Presentation of Accomplishments is complete!

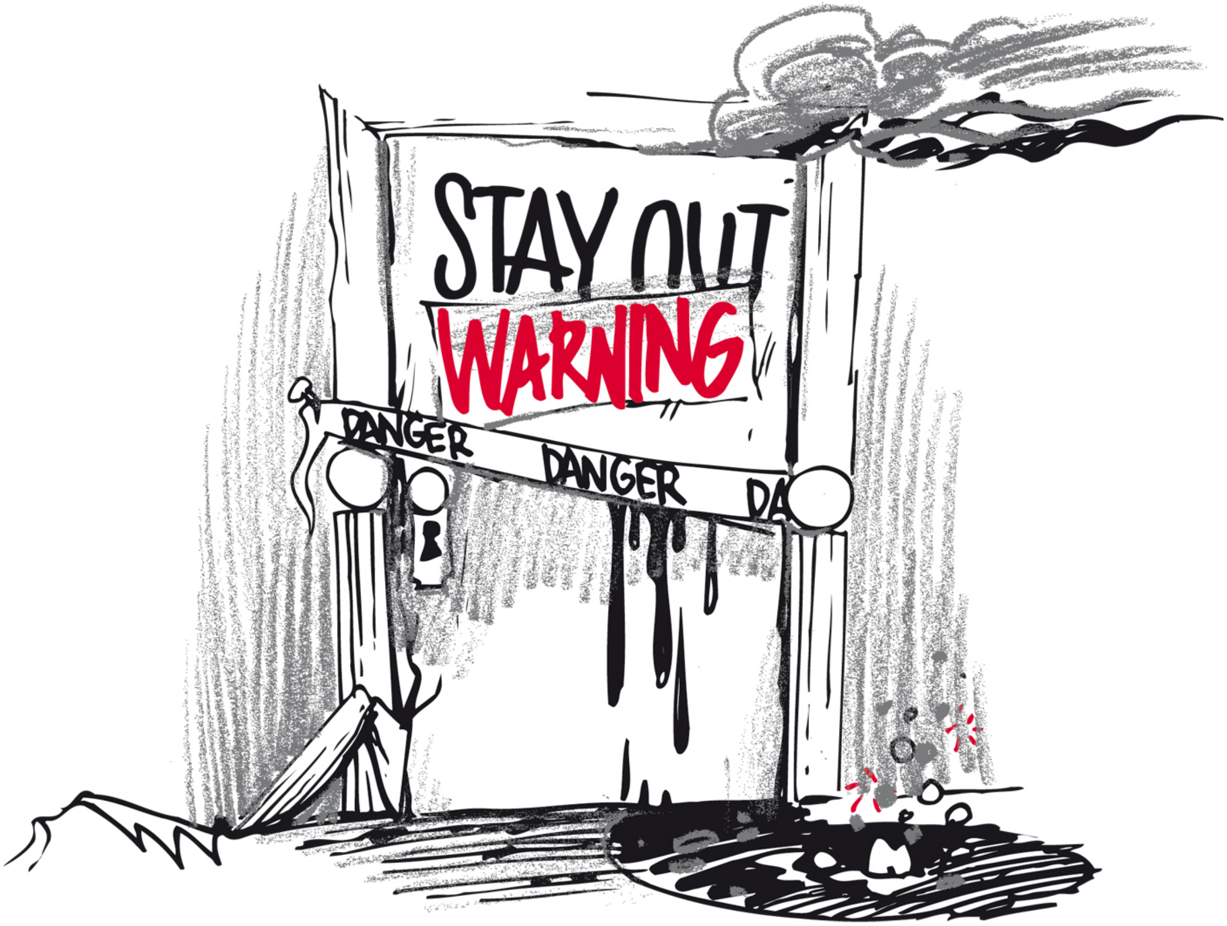
Later

Have been whiling away the hours before I can wake Mom by sternly counseling the cats on proper road-trip behavior, getting all open experiments into "two weeks' vacation" mode, and writing Mom a detailed list of emergency instructions in case of any problems:



Raven on Sherpa duty.
Show-off!

1. If you hear sizzling, fizzling, or crackling noises from my room: CALL ME IMMEDIATELY.
2. If you hear loud whumping noises from my room: DO NOTHING—WHUMPER IS WORKING AS PROGRAMMED.
3. If I'm not back as scheduled on May 26: DO NOTHING—WE ARE MOST LIKELY DETAINED AT GARAGE SALE OR THE LIKE.
4. If I'm not back by June: MY LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT IS UNDER THE FLOORBOARDS IN THE ATTIC.
5. If you get sick of filling out homeschooling paperwork: SIGN YOUR NAME ON EVERYTHING AND I'LL DO THE REST.
6. If the Cryptozoological Society calls: TELL THEM THEY CAN KEEP THE SPECIMEN—I'VE GOT TWELVE OF MY OWN.
7. If there's nothing on TV: YOU MAY ENJOY GIRLS IN BLACK OR LIES ABOUT CATS AND DOGS, BUT THERE WILL BE EVEN MORE BLOOD IS GOING TO BE WAY TOO INTENSE FOR YOU.
8. If there's an earthquake: DUCK AND COVER.
9. If the cockroach colony escapes: LET THEM GO. IF THEY RETURN, THEY ARE OURS FOREVER. IF THEY DON'T, IT WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE.
10. If you get bored or lonely while we are gone: DO NOT—REPEAT—DO NOT ADOPT ANOTHER DAUGHTER. I WILL MAKE HER SUFFER.
11. If Ricky calls you again: HANG UP ON THE JERK.
12. If green bubbling liquid seeps out from under my door: CALL HAZARDOUS WASTE HOTLINE IMMEDIATELY.
13. If you smell smoke coming from my room: SAVE YOURSELF—THE SUCKER'S GONNA BLOW.


STAY OUT
WARNING
DANGER
DANGER
DA

Later

Have finished all final presentations for Mom! It was very tiring! She was extremely touched by my efforts and even shed a few Mom-style tears as she handed me her evaluations.

Me
You OK there, Patti? Need a tissue?

Mom
[Using her sleeve.]
Nope, I’m good.

Me

So I pass?

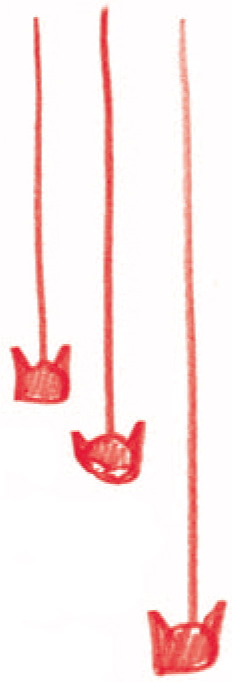
M.
You pass. I especially liked the matchstick caffeine molecule. And here I thought How-To with Glue would be more about you repairing my favorite coffee mug for me.

Me
Oh…right. Maybe next term.

M.
Seriously, E, this is pretty momentous. I mean, my little girl is completing her first full year of school!

Me
Yeah, well, it's not like you didn't think I could do it, right?…RIGHT?

M.
Oh no, it's not that. I had total faith in your abilities…



Me

…Yeah?

M.
…I just didn’t think you WOULD do it. I really expected you to come up with some kind of creative excuse to get out of the whole thing…possibly in the form of a disease…like, maybe a week in.

Me
Hmph.

M.
But you proved me wrong, and just look at what you’ve accomplished!

Me
Yes. Indeed. What a sense of self-worth this gives me.
[Hoping she has perhaps forgotten that I am not, actually, technically, done with the school year yet, as I still owe her an in-depth documentary film project.]

M.
It really raises the bar for that documentary film project you’ll be doing on your trip to Seasidetown. I must admit, my expectations are a lot higher now that I see what you can do when you’ve really set your mind to it.

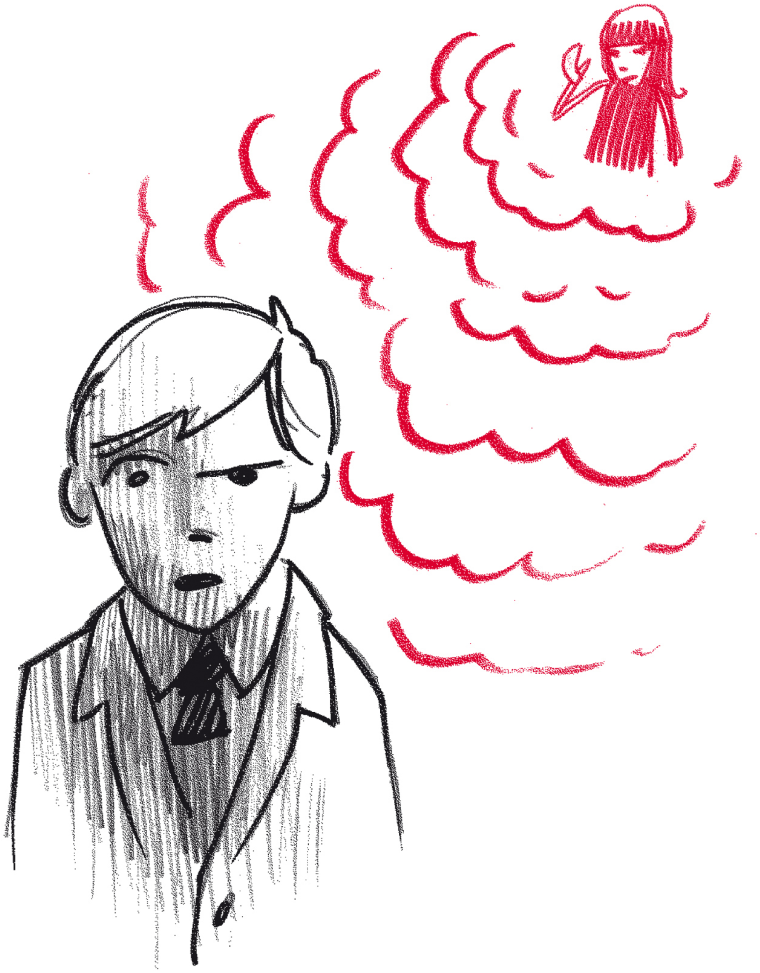
Me
GAHHHHH! So…the lesson here is, never succeed at anything, because it will only raise people’s expectations of you and make it more difficult to please them next time around???

M.
There, there.

* * *

Later

Am writing this in the van. It’s about 5 a.m. and we are finally on the road. Mom packed us some sandwiches and (again, tearfully) waved farewell as the six of us scrambled into our places (some of us [Sabbath, NeeChee, Miles, I'm looking in your direction] less eagerly than others). At the last moment, as the van was backing out of the driveway, Mom rushed after us and demanded to know whether I had gotten an all-clear from Jakey regarding Attikol. I assured her that all was cool, and we finally departed for points east. Then I felt bad for misleading her and called Jakey. Got voicemail. Left message. Am not worried—I KNOW he would alert me right away if there was any trouble.



Sending psychic vibes—hope Jakey's listening!

Here's another reason I'm not too worried: It's been months since Jakey had anything very alarming to say about ol' Attikol. Maybe three and a half weeks ago he called me just to check in. He told me his latest scores on YarbAmerica, Moon Imposition, and Follicular Challenge; listed various ridiculous things people had asked him during his nightly performance of psychic powers (e.g., “Does my terry-poo truly love me?”); updated me on his parrot, Lily’s, newest annoying vocabulary (“dawg” and “bling”); reported how often Raven was mentioned by men with crushes on her (Attikol—seven times; Ümlaut—five times; random guy looking at the painting of her as a winged half-bird/half-woman on the side of Attikol’s trailer—once); complained about Attikol’s latest restrictions on him (no more walking through the audience, for one thing —Attikol rightly suspects him of wanting to escape the caravan); and described Attikol’s latest-mistreatment of Ümlaut (tickle-torture by Attikol’s thugs…in front of Attikol’s lady friends).

And then I regaled him with tales of Raven’s most recent grand fiasco (I instructed her to wash the windows—just trying to do something nice for Mom, you know—and she removed the glass from every window frame in the house, then crammed the panes into the dishwasher, breaking them all in the process); updated him on how school was going; and renewed my promise to help him escape the caravan—just as soon as the semester ended!

What I’m saying is that there’s been nothing unusual in recent intel from Jakey. If Attikol had nefarious plans, if the slightest thought of ME popped into his mind, Jakey would see it. And he’d have found a way to let me know by now.

Anyway. Am SOOOOOOOO glad we are on our way! Let the mischief begin!!!!!!

Later

The Mischief has Begun. We had not gone ten miles before we got the chance to do some user testing of Raven’s Chauffeur 2.0 programming. As follows:

Officer
Good morning, ma’am. May I see your license, registration, and proof of insurance?

Raven
It would be my pleasure, Officer!
[Handing them over.]
[Smiling, dimpling, and winking as programmed.]

O.
Alrighty then, Miss…Raven. Your documents are in order. The reason I pulled you over is that your van has a number of…strange…appendages that I’m not sure are standard for a ’63 Volkswagen Microbus.

R.
Indeed it does. Perhaps you’d like to see our permit from the National Registry of Highly Unusual Automobiles?

Me
[Helpfully.]
I got it right here, Aunt Raven…it’s under the cat box! Oops, a little cat barf on it…let me just wipe that off for you…

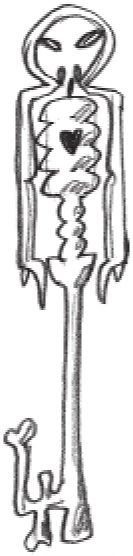
O.
Errrr…that won’t be necessary. Drive safely, now.

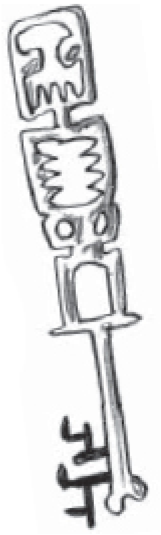
May 13

I only go out to get me a fresh appetite for being alone.

—Lord Byron

Mid-morning. Have been sleeping in sunproof tent in the back of the van. Was awakened by our first garage-sale break. Decent haul: three skeleton keys, four stuffed animals (slightly soiled), and one tarp (nearly new). Am going back to sleep.



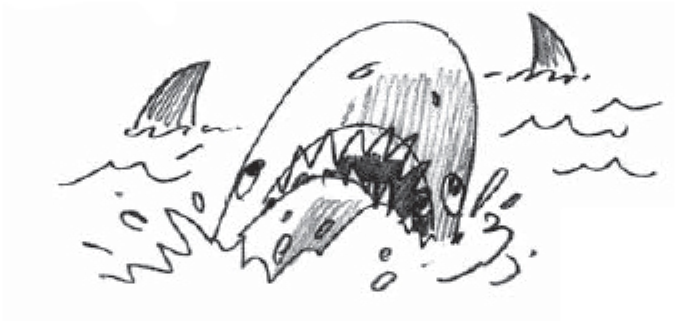


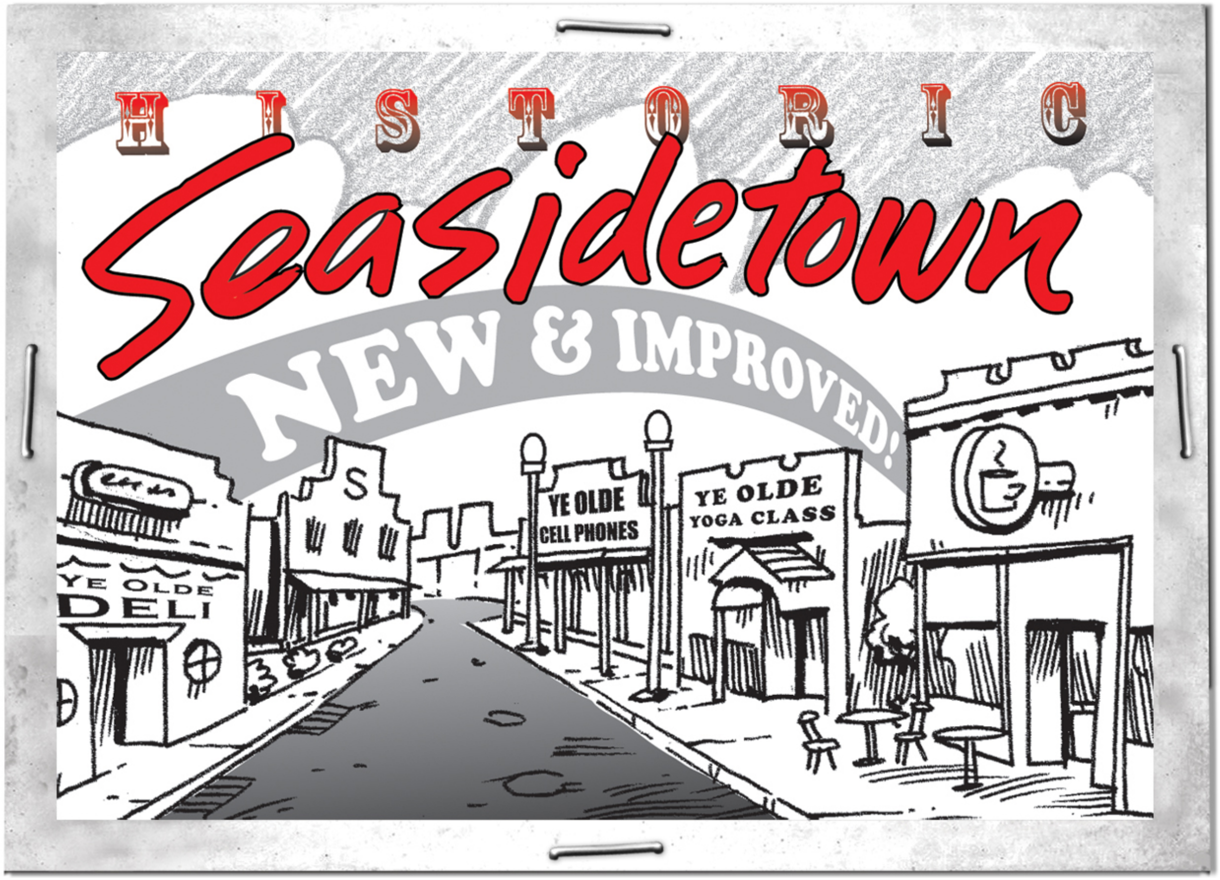
Later

We are approaching Seasidetown. Am very glad I arranged for Raven to drive through the day while I slept. Not that I have anything against road trips, but spending the day enjoying lovely nightmares about live burial, shark attack, or zombie Armageddon is FAR preferable to watching one small town after another go by.

Later

Gravblatts! I have an icky feeling about current-day Seasidetown developing in my gut, based on the following road sign:





Let's hope the actual town is more like what I saw in 1790 and MUCH less like some kind of theme-park version of 1790, as advertised.

Later

We are parked outside the hotel. Seasidetown is indeed a theme-park version of the 1790s. Souvenir kiosks everywhere. Revolution Era façades made of brightly colored plastic glued on top of actual Revolution Era buildings. Disappointing! Well, I guess I won't be using any actual cityscapes in my Documentary—everything will have to come from my memories of Seasidetown in the good old days. Am glad I'm using a ThoughtCorder and not a commonplace camera!

Needless to say, I tried to summon black rock as soon as we drove into town. (By closing my eyes tightly, chanting "Black Rock" 13 times, and touching my tongue to my nose.) Nothing yet. Am not in the best frame of mind right now, though. Will try again when I am less van-lagged.

Later

We have checked in to our hotel and started settling in. Might as well settle in good, since I am not looking forward to stepping foot outside our room anytime soon. WHY can't there be one spot on earth where people make smart decisions about how to portray the past, instead of making everything into some hideous, artificial, plasticized piece of future-garbage?

Later

ThoughtCorded a short film of myself pulling down hideous, artificial Revolution Era façades and burning them in the town square, to the horror of tourists and townspeople alike. It went a long way toward making me feel better. Am very pleased I now have a cinematic outlet for the most antisocial aspects of my personality. Should really cut down on my legal bills.

Later

Hunger has forced me out of the room. I packed enough cat food for our entire stay, but veggie sandwiches are really best made fresh, and I am clear out of provisions. Also needed a fresh supply of newspaper to shield my stuff from any cat disasters. So Raven and I stopped by the concierge desk to see where the best all-night diners and grocery stores might be. Conversation was largely unpromising, with small patches of mild interest.

Me
Could you tell me where there's a good all-night restaurant?

Concierge Dude
Oh, you'd need to drive into Salem for something like that. Most places in Seasidetown close around ten.

Me
How about a grocery store?

C.D.
Sure, there’s Revolutionary Foods on Ninth and Main.

Me
Wow, is it, like, some kind of radical health food store or what?

C.D.
Oh dear, no! That’s strictly a reference to our proud Revolutionary heritage.

Me
[Swallowing disappointment.]
[Pushing aside visions of entertainingly bizarre health-oriented foodstuffs.]
Oh well, as long as it’s open all night!

C.D.
Oh, it’s not open all night! You’d need to drive into Salem for that.

Me
GAHH—OK, Raven, I guess we’re driving into Salem tonight. Um, I’ll take today’s paper, please.

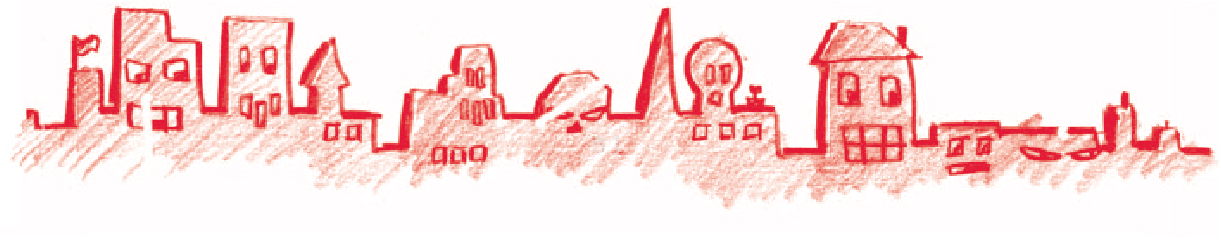
C.D.
Certainly, Miss. Enjoy the cover article on our Mayor Ebenezer.

Me
[Ears pricking up.]
Ebenezer, you say? Of the Revolutionary Era Ebenezers?

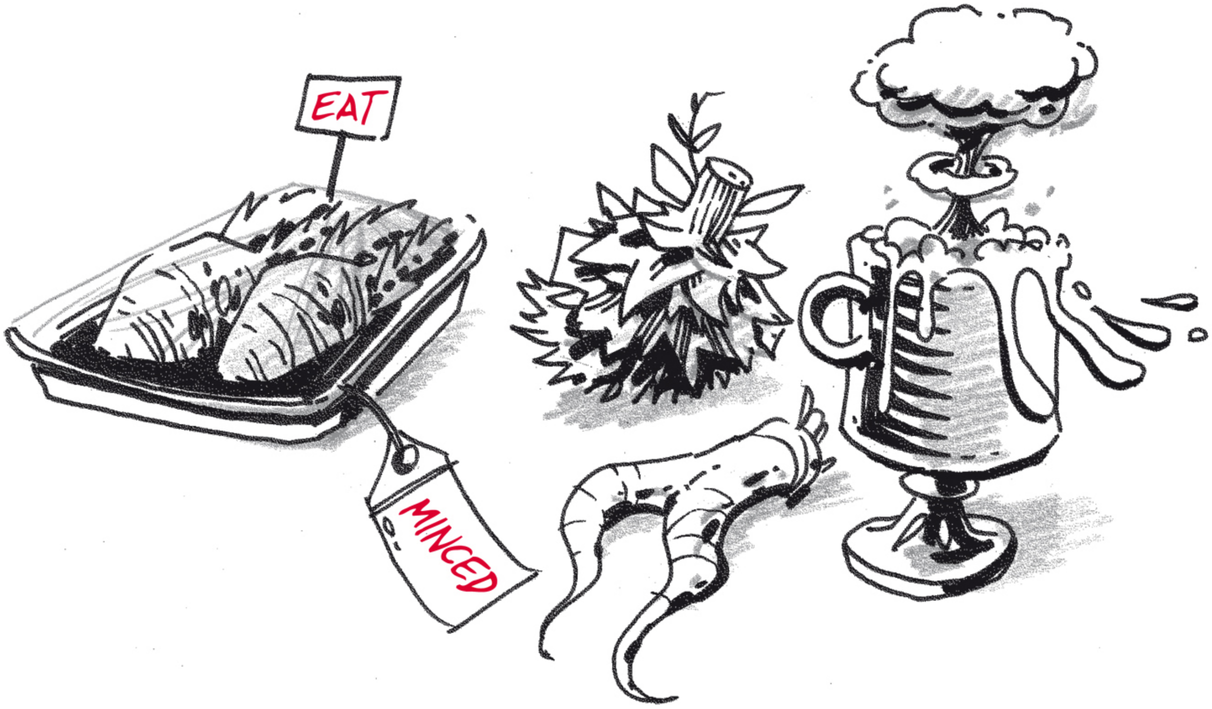
C.D.
[Warming to his topic.]
Why, yes! The Ebenezers have resided in Seasidetown since the 1760s, and have been mayors and councilmembers here since 1820.

Me
Huh. That first Mayor Ebenezer wouldn’t have been Deborah, would it?

C.D.
Why yes, Miss! You do know your Seasidetown history!



Me
Yeah. Her family and I knew her as Sweetie-Pie. But that’s beside the point. Glad to see the Ebenezers are doing well here.



With that, we departed, leaving the concierge looking very puzzled.

Seriously, though, it IS nice to see what the Ebenezers are up to these days. When I met Sweetie-Pie in 1790, she was a three-year-old with extraordinary powers of perception and persuasion. So it doesn’t exactly surprise me that her descendants have been successful. (Assuming your definition of “success” includes being a mayor or councilmember.

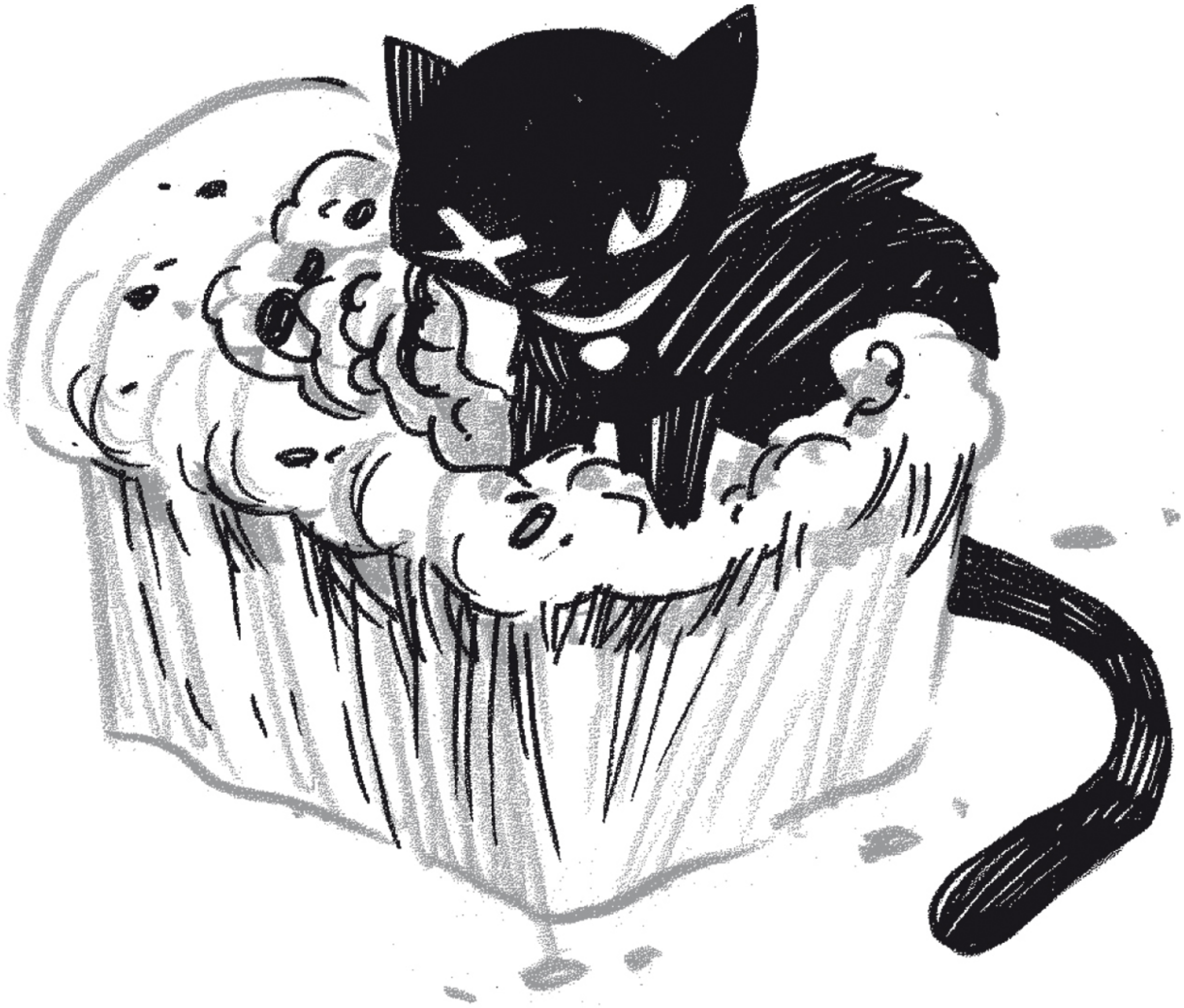
Personally, I’d consider being the wily archnemesis of the mayor and councilmembers way more of a success.)

Later

Driving back from Salem. Have stocked up on groceries. It was very annoying to drive an hour out of town for food. Will time my hunger better in the days to come.

Later

Back at the hotel. Came out of the bathroom to find Miles knee-deep in a loaf of bread. He had eaten the tops off several slices already. Flabbertarkus!!! Not that I mind eating cat-gnawed bread—but, chances are, I will be seeing that bread again in the context of a cat-puke puddle somewhere in this hotel room. Need to lay down some newspaper sooner than later.



Miles:
A loaf of crime!

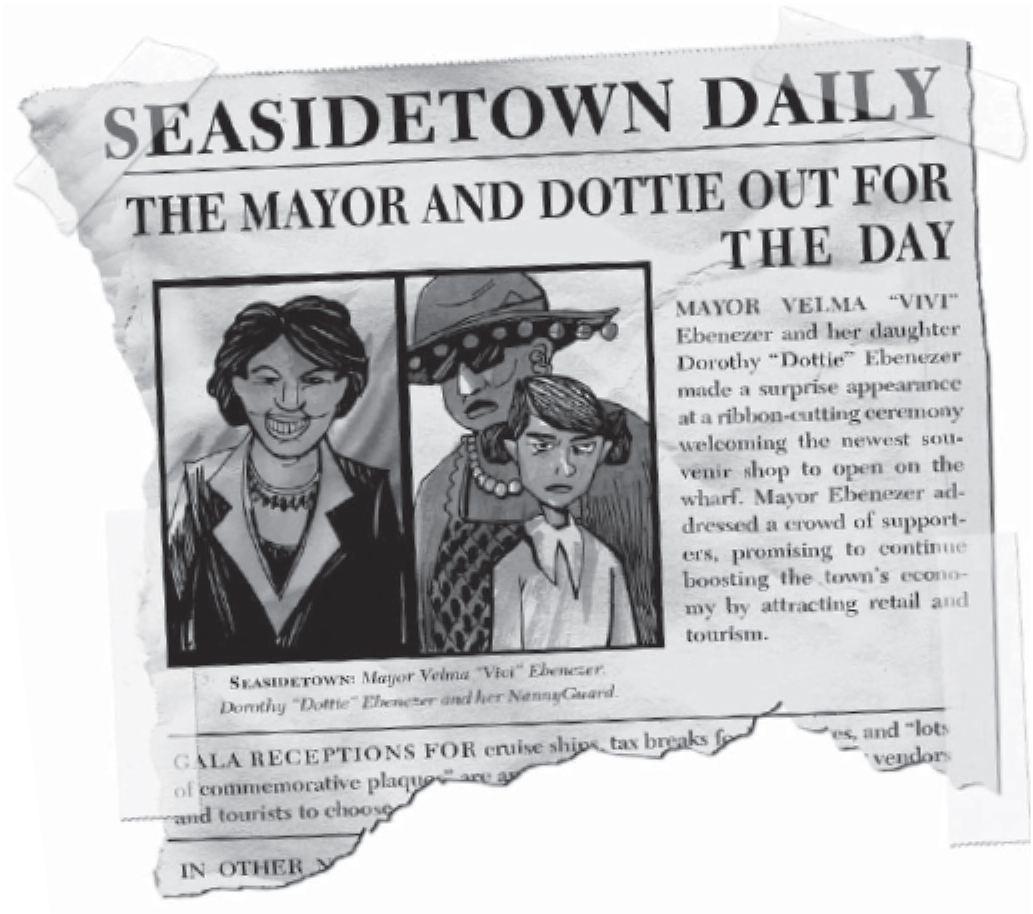
Later

Since I was unfolding the newspaper anyway, I went ahead and read the cover article on Mayor Vivi Ebenezer, per the concierge's suggestion. Here's what I learned:

1. Including Sweetie-Pie and Vivi, there've been eight Mayor Ebenezers in Seasidetown since the early 1800s.
2. And today the family has a rock-solid reputation for social reform, philanthropy, intense devotion to Seasidetown, and all-around raging civic pride.

3. For example, they were instrumental in the women’s suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, the prison reform movement, the Free Brunch for Children movement…you name it.
4. They have harbored slaves, clothed the poor, planted trees, created jobs, and fought injustice in its many forms.
5. And most of the parks and public buildings in Seasidetown were built by Ebenezers.
6. All of which made me ask myself whether there was anything left for Mayor Vivi to accomplish.
7. But upon reading further, I learned that she has promised to boost the town’s tourism industry. Hmm…I thought it looked plenty boosted already.
8. She plans to start by attracting cruise ships to its harbor.
9. And by allocating funds for the installation of commemorative plaques.
10. And by giving big tax breaks to vendors of souvenirs. >Choke.< >Barf.<
11. The article wrapped up with Vivi encouraging all of Seasidetown’s citizens to “Ask not what Seasidetown can do for you…ask what YOU can do for Seasidetown.”
12. Apparently she feels this goes double (quadruple??) for her 13-year-old daughter, Dorothy (“Dottie”), whom Vivi firmly expects to follow in her footsteps with a brilliant political career.
13. “I’m like any parent,” Vivi told the reporter. “I don’t care what path my daughter chooses, as long as it results in her name on a commemorative plaque someday.”

Here’s the picture from the front page, showing Vivi and Dottie:



SEASIDETOWN DAILY

THE MAYOR AND DOTTIE OUT FOR THE DAY

MAYOR VELMA "VIVI" Ebenezer and her daughter Dorothy "Dottie" Ebenezer made a surprise appearance at a ribbon-cutting ceremony welcoming the newest souvenir shop to open on the wharf. Mayor Ebenezer addressed a crowd of supporters, promising to continue boosting the town's economy by attracting retail and tourism.

SEASIDETOWN: *Mayor Velma "Vivi" Ebenezer. Dorothy "Dottie" Ebenezer and her NannyGuard.*

GALA RECEPTIONS FOR cruise ships, tax breaks f … es, and "lots
of commemorative plaques" are a … vendors
and tourists to choose

IN OTHER

Later

Things to do in Seasidetown:

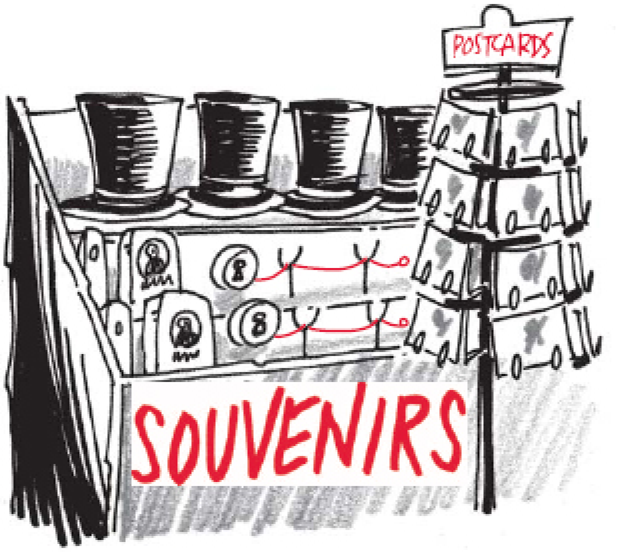
1. SUMMON BLACK ROCK. The sooner the better!!!!!!!!
2. Figure out what my exceptional black-rock-fueled talent could be.
3. Do some serious, unadulterated, idle WALLOWING in black rock. Hey, I deserve it!
4. Revisit Great-Aunt Lily's house and see if it has been made into a historical monument or part of a theme park.
5. And if someone HAS defaced my ancestor's home, take suitable revenge.
6. Check out the secret tunnels under Great-Aunt Lily's house and see if any of my Dark Aunts made improvements in the past couple centuries.
7. Carve my initials in a chair in the Dark Girls' Boardroom in the tunnels under Great-Aunt Lily's house.

8. Communicate to Mayor Ebenezer my disgust with Seasidetown’s transformation into a Revolutionary Theme Park.
9. Serious mischief-making.
10. Possibly involving minor sabotage of certain theme-park elements of Seasidetown.
11. Plant TranscriptoSpy devices all over town and monitor people’s ridiculous conversations from the comfort of my room.
12. Talk owner of local restaurant into staying open all night. (Admittedly low chance of success on this one.)
13. And of course…Ye Olde Documentarie Filme Projecte!!!

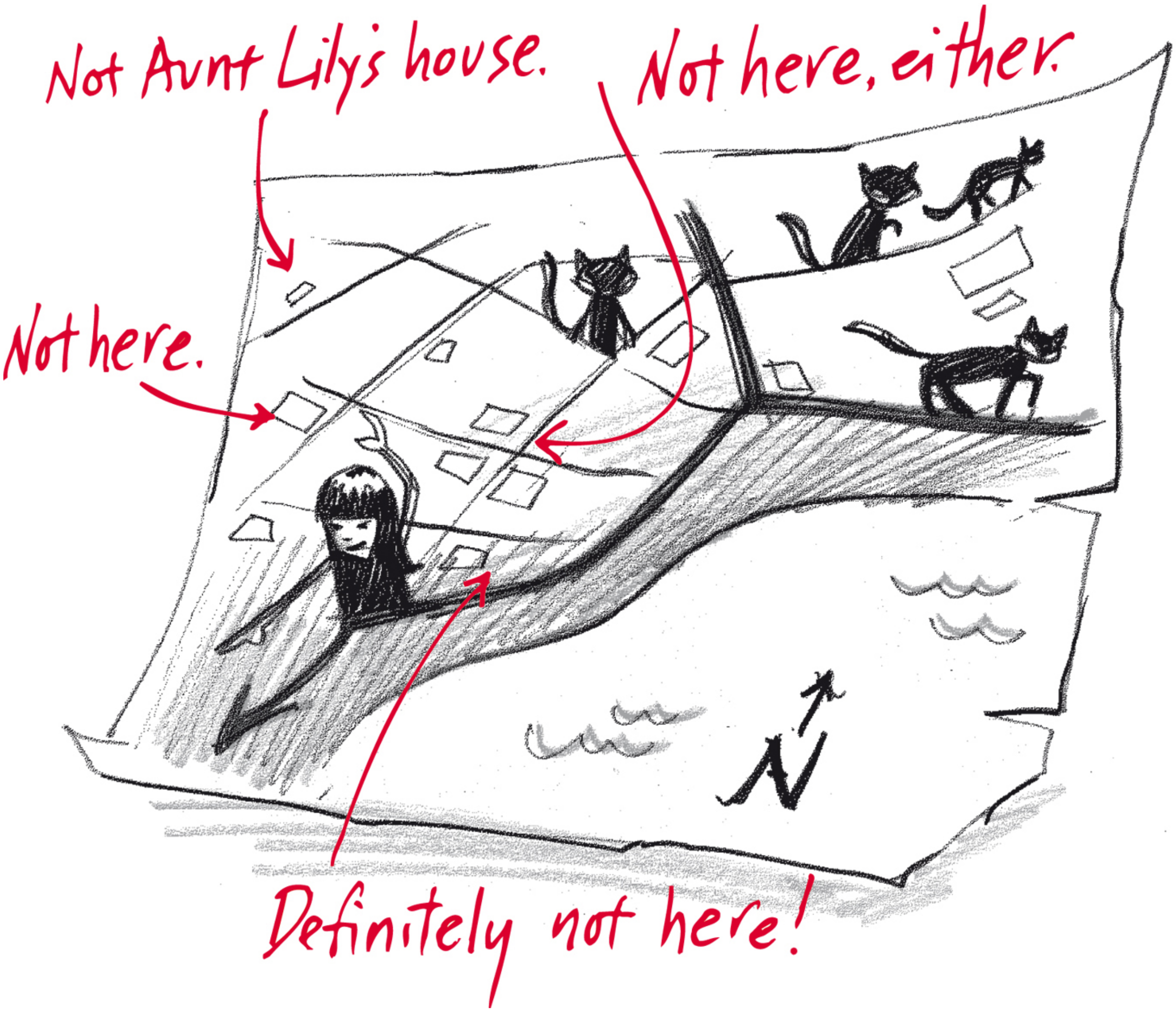
Later

Cabin fever struck, and HARD. Could not stand the hotel room for one minute longer. At least that got me and the cats out and about. The first thing I wanted to see was Great-Aunt Lily's old house, but I could not find it. Am I losing my sense of direction? Had thought Mystery would be of some help since she was here with me in 1790, but noooooooo, I guess she does not have a built-in biological GPS like I assumed. I gave her the chance to show the way—but she led us to a fenced-off lot, then just sat down and started grooming herself like she WASN'T all embarrassed to have failed.

I must be disoriented by all the changes in Seasidetown in the past 200+ years. And yet, on the other hand, certain unlikable things in Seasidetown have stubbornly refused to change. Am somewhat outraged (for example) to find a souvenir shop selling postcards depicting Uncle Boris and his medicine show caravan, as well as Uncle Boris souvenir top hats, Uncle Boris souvenir yo-yos, and Uncle Boris souvenir cell phone charms.



CHAAAA! As I remember it, that guy bailed Seasidetown in 1790 with his tail between his legs. Cannot BELIEVE people actually remember him two centuries later! And someone is making money on this sad fact! Disgusting.


Not Aunt Lily's house.
Not here, either.
Not here.
N
Definitely not here!

Later

Have not found Aunt Lily's house yet. Man, I really hope it's still around. I guess there's no guarantee. Am trying not to worry. Just because Aunt Lily's black rock showed up there first…that doesn't mean mine would…right?!? If her house WERE critical to me summoning black rock, then surely my great-aunts would have mentioned it in their letter…RIGHT?!?!?!?

Will keep trying for a bit longer. I still have an hour or so before the sun comes up. Am going to stop looking where I think it should be and start looking in the unlikely places. Maybe I'll have better luck!!!

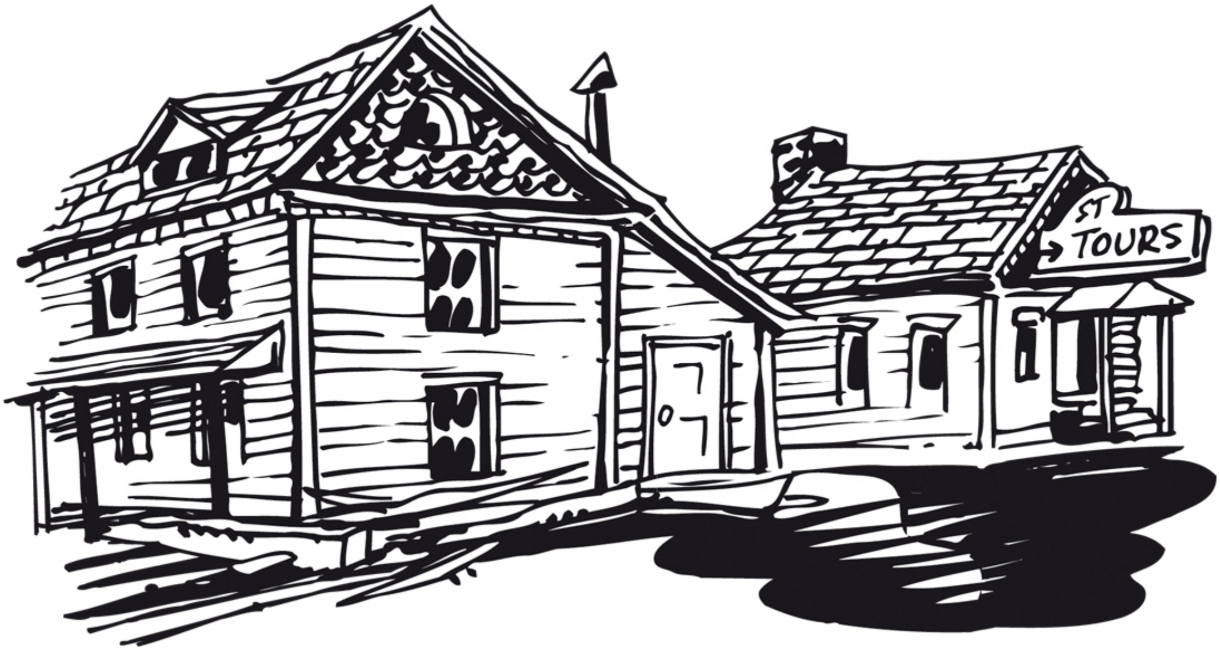
Later

SUCCESS! Have located Aunt Lily's house! I clearly HAVE lost my sense of direction, because it's nowhere near where I thought it was. Oh well. The important thing is that I've found it, and it looks unoccupied (if somewhat decrepit). Have ThoughtCorded my initial observations of it for use in the Documentary.

Oh…and standing next to it did not enable me to summon black rock. (Otherwise, I guess I'd be making a very short documentary!)

As eager as I am to get inside, and walk the Dark Girl tunnels once again, and revisit the inner sanctum of the Boardroom, I think I'm going to wait until tomorrow night. Am pretty exhausted and the sun is coming up. I need to come back when I'm fully rested and have the entire glorious night to devote to exploration, documentarying, and concentrated summoning!

Am headed back to the hotel for a good day's sleep.



Aunt Lily's house: FOUND.

May 14

For every prohibition you create you also create an underground.
—Jello Biafra

The sun is down, I have plenty of provisions packed, my ThoughtCorder is fully charged, and the cats and I are headed to Aunt Lily’s house. Will write more later when I have discoveries to document!

Later

Man, I LOOOOOOOOVE revisiting ancestral homes after 200+ years! Aunt Lily’s house has barely changed inside since I last saw it in 1790, aside from being EXTREMELY dusty. (A change for the better, in my opinion.) EXCELLENT material for opening titles of the Documentary!

As soon as we got in, I tried my hardest to summon black rock. Summoned and summoned until my head ached. No dice! Will keep trying.

Later

Poked around the house for a while and eventually located the dumbwaiter, which was how I used to get into the basement back in the 1790s. I wasted no time in crawling inside. It probably wasn't super prudent of me to assume the cables would still hold my weight after two centuries of rust, dust, and decay, but for whatever reason—ancestral mojo, the fresh seaside air, or just dumb (waiter) luck—I did NOT immediately plummet to my death. Instead I descended gradually to the basement in style. (If "folded into the tiniest ball possible" can be called style.)

Slid open the dumbwaiter door and there I was in the basement! A moment later the cats had joined me (having very sensibly taken the stairs), my eyes adjusted to the glorious dark, and I started scanning the floor for the hole leading to the secret tunnels. That's when I started noticing changes—the basement has not held up to the passing centuries as well as the rest of the house. The foundation is very damaged and everything looks different down here. The hole in the floor and the entrance to the tunnels have both been widened quite a bit—I think it's safe to assume that a Dark Aunt has been here since Lily's time! The tunnels have also been rerouted. Not surprising. I'm sure that in more than two hundred years, tunnels are bound to cave in and need redigging.

Am very eager to locate the Boardroom. The first time I got inside that place, I felt the concentrated, uncanny energy of Dark Girls zinging all around me. It seems like an extremely likely summoning spot. Here's hoping that my next entry is stained with splashes of liquid black rock!

Later

TERRIBLE NEWS!!!

ATTIKOL IS IN SEASIDETOWN!!!!!!

AND HE'S IN THE DARK GIRLS' BOARDROOM!!!!!

—OK. Must get a grip on myself. Am shaking with rage. Can barely write. THAT BRAXDRABBLING FLOPWART, I'M GONNA…Settle down…Must control self…Must figure this out…

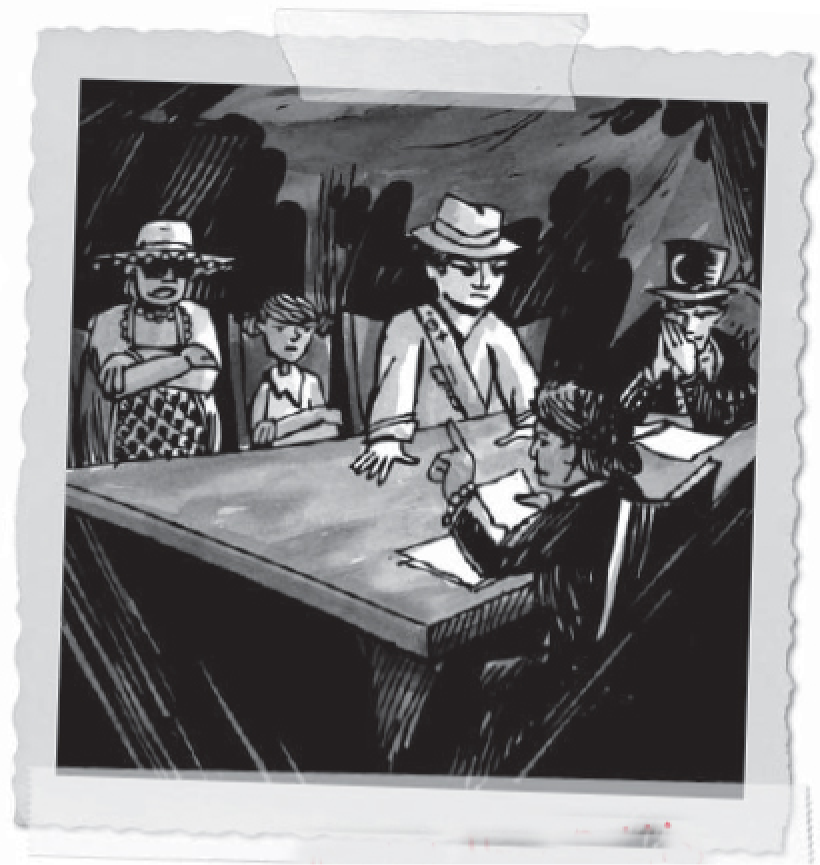
—OK. Am calmer. Here's what happened: The cats and I were merrily exploring along, mapping tunnels as we went, when we came to a (sort of) familiar door—it looked more or less like the same heavy door with iron fittings that I remember opening into the Boardroom. And if I hadn't been wearing a headlamp, I'd have noticed much sooner that there was light shining from the cracks around the door. Extremely suspicious!!! Luckily, I DID notice before just barging in, and I slid my handy periscope under the door to see what the grabfrax was going on. Here's a spy photo of what I saw:

Am feeling super freaked out by Attikol's presence in MY Boardroom. Am leaving a TranscriptoSpy at the doorway (extremely well-hidden) and bailing.

Later-back at the hotel

OK—WHY didn't Jakey warn me that Attikol was coming to Seasidetown? Either he's no longer loyal to ME, his OWN COUSIN, or………….

Or something has happened to Jakey!



Attikol, Thug, Dottie, NannyGuard, and Vivi—INTERLOPERS!!!

Am WAY more inclined to believe the second possibility.

And am WAY horrified to think what it might mean.

In addition to the implication for Jakey, it means it's NOT impossible that Attikol knows about black rock…

And could be here in Seasidetown to summon it away from me!

Can't panic…have to keep control…

—Oh. Might be a good idea to check the TranscriptoFeed of Attikol's conversation in the Boardroom—

OK, all printed…what I got of it, anyway. Here it is:

Attikol
Let’s go over this one more time, Dottie. I need to know everything you found in Jakey’s mind regarding Emily Strange as of this evening. Anything…any little thing at all.

Dottie
[Sighing.]
I keep telling you…I didn’t find ANYTHING.

A.
But…I don’t…oh, very well. We will just have to hope that she’ll be in Seasidetown soon. We’ll need to monitor all incoming traffic, and get every police officer in town looking for her. Mayor Ebenezer, can I rely on your help? We MUST find Emily Strange!

Mayor Ebenezer
Don’t get me wrong, Attikol—I do appreciate your assistance in revitalizing the souvenir industry in Seasidetown. But I feel I’m missing something. What is the purpose of finding this girl?

A.
Why, Vivi—may I call you Vivi?—she has certain very valuable information that I need.

M.E.
Unless a crime is being committed, this is no concern for my police force.

A.
Ah, I understand! How about this: She is attempting to steal my ancestral treasure!

M.E.
Well, I’m not mobilizing a single officer without a warrant.

A.
A warrant will be no problem at all! Let me call my favorite judge…

Wow. Am mightily stunned by all this.

Cannot quite process what I'm reading.

I mean…

"Everything you found in Jakey's mind regarding Emily Strange…"

That one line is knocking me on my cheeks right now!

Am I dealing with ANOTHER psychic here?

Well…if I can believe that Jakey has psychic ability, is it really such a stretch to think someone else can have it, too?

All right. Let me take this slowly, one point at a time.

1. Dottie Ebenezer may have some variety of psychic ability.
2. And has been reading Jakey's mind…for Attikol…looking for information on ME. [Shudder!]
3. But "as of this evening," she can't find anything.
4. For reasons unknown…and mysterious, considering the large amount Jakey knows about me.
5. Maybe he found a way to block her???
6. Or…maybe she already got everything there was to get?????
7. Which would explain how Attikol knew I was coming to Seasidetown.
8. But I sure wish I knew exactly what information he wants from me!
9. As well as exactly what he knows about "ancestral treasure"!!!!
10. In any case, I am smathering lucky that Attikol does not know I'm already in Seasidetown!
11. Although I'm flakkering UNlucky that Seasidetown's entire police force will be looking for me.
12. But at least I KNOW they're looking for me.
13. And…I packed costumes.

Must get out and locate Jakey. Am putting on a disguise.

Later

Attikol and crew are staying in this very hotel—a fact I discovered by nearly bumping into Attikol's business partner/punching bag, Ümlaut, in the lobby. Am very grateful for my excellent disguise! More later!

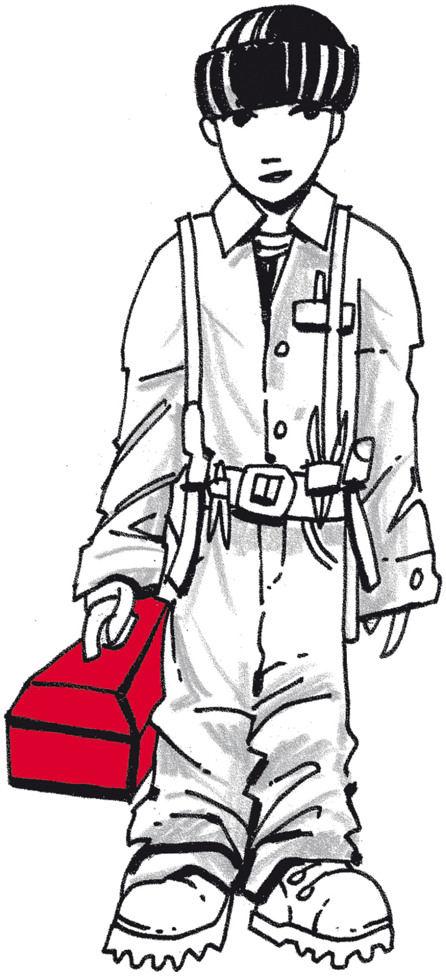
Later

Am now in the hotel's ventilation ducts! Am very dusty! Have found Jakey! He has a room on the first floor. Unfortunately two of Attikol's overly well-dressed thugs are in there with him, so our conversation will have to wait until I can engineer a distraction.

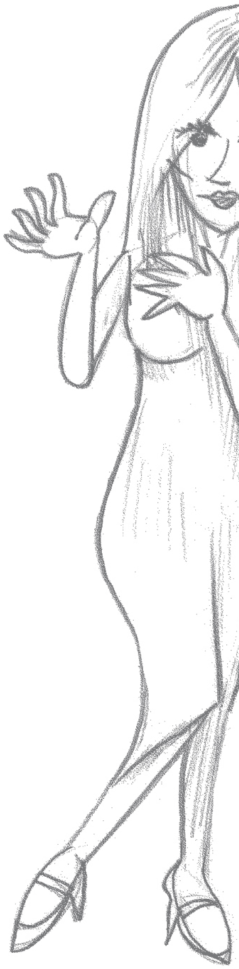
Later

Back in my room. Things are not good.

Here's what happened: First I outfitted Raven in blond wig and slinky dress.



Me, disguised as a (very short) repairman.



Raven in disguise!

Then, while I wriggled back through the ducts to Jakey's room, Raven walked up to his door and knocked. When one of Attikol's henchmen answered, she explained that she was having problems getting her shower to start. Could she possibly get a little help from a strong, handsome man? Oh, and (appearing to spot Thug #2) it was probably a two-man job—perhaps his friend could join them?

Those thugs never looked back but followed her out, drooling. As soon as the door closed behind them, I got Jakey's attention.

Me
Hey, Jakey. I'm up here in the ventilation.

Jakey
Eeek! What? Who?

Me
MME, dimcheeks. Keep the racket down. Those thugs are out in the hall trying to help Raven find her hotel room.

J.
Who are you?

Me
Fripes, what's with you? It's Emily, you nut-flake!

J.
OK…Um, I can see in your mind that you know me, but…I don't know you.

Me
Oh…my…blatjarx. Are you for real?

J.
Uh, yeah, I'm for real. I have no clue who you are.

Me
[Choking on thin air at this information.]

J.
Wow, there's a LOT of stuff in your mind about me. I guess we knew each other pretty well, huh?

Me
Dude! We're COUSINS! You don't remember ANYTHING about me?

J.
Nothing.

Me
Anything about black rock or Attikol's plans for getting his hands on it?

J.
Doesn't sound familiar. Here…just give me a minute…I'm starting to know you again, sort of.

Me
What! Why, are the memories coming back?

J.
Oh…no, those are your thoughts I'm picking up, that's all.

Me
That girl Dottie…what did she do to you? Have you lost ALL your memories?

J.
Hard to say. She calls herself a thought puller. But I still know who I am and all.

Me
A thought puller? What in the skeezles is THAT?
I thought maybe she was another psychic.

J.
It’s definitely different from what I can do.

Me
Does she actually pull thoughts OUT OF YOUR MIND?

J.
I think she does. Hey, whatever you do, don’t let her touch you!

Me
She has to touch you to pull thoughts? Good to know.

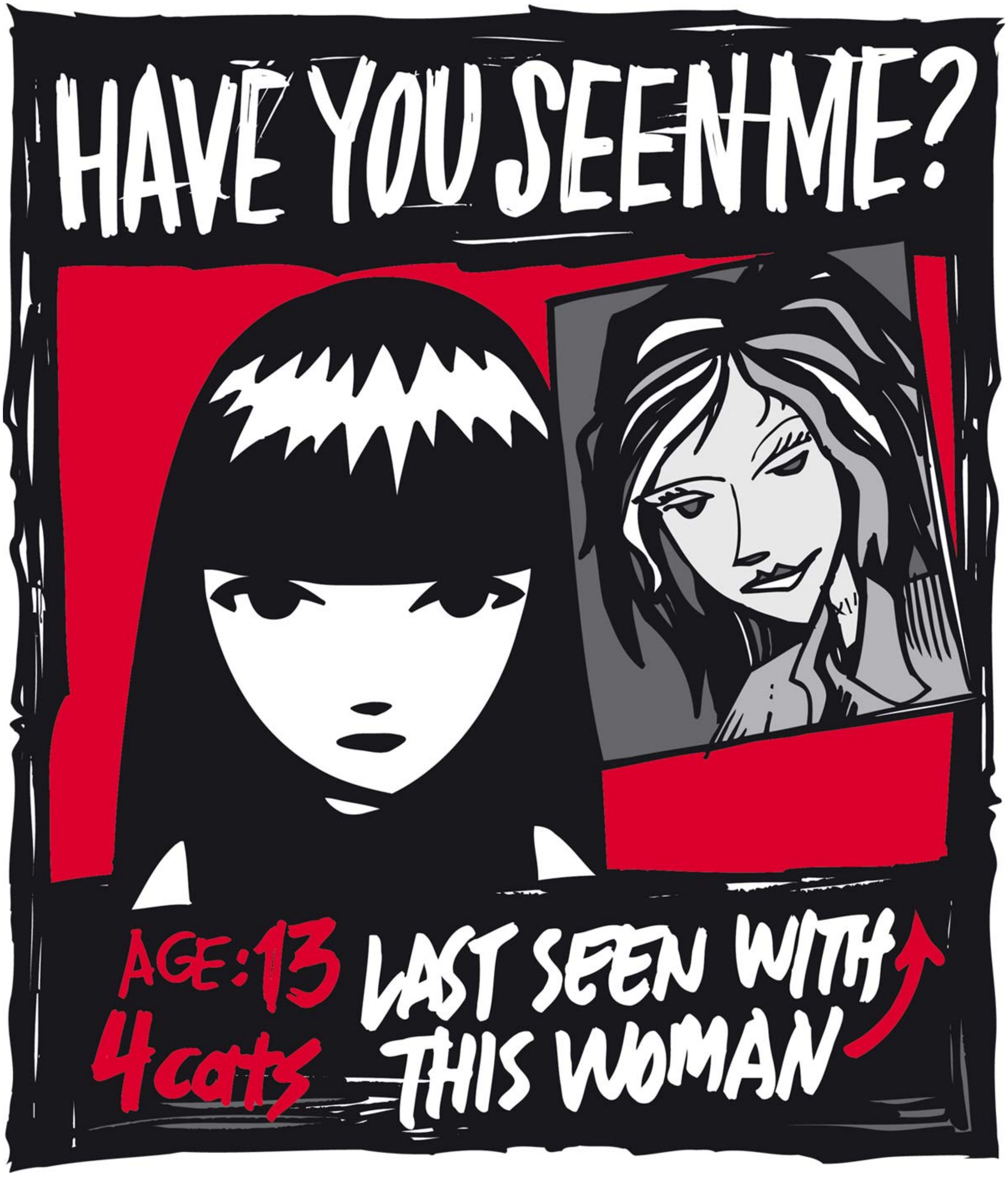
J.
Yeah, and it’s no relaxing massage, either.

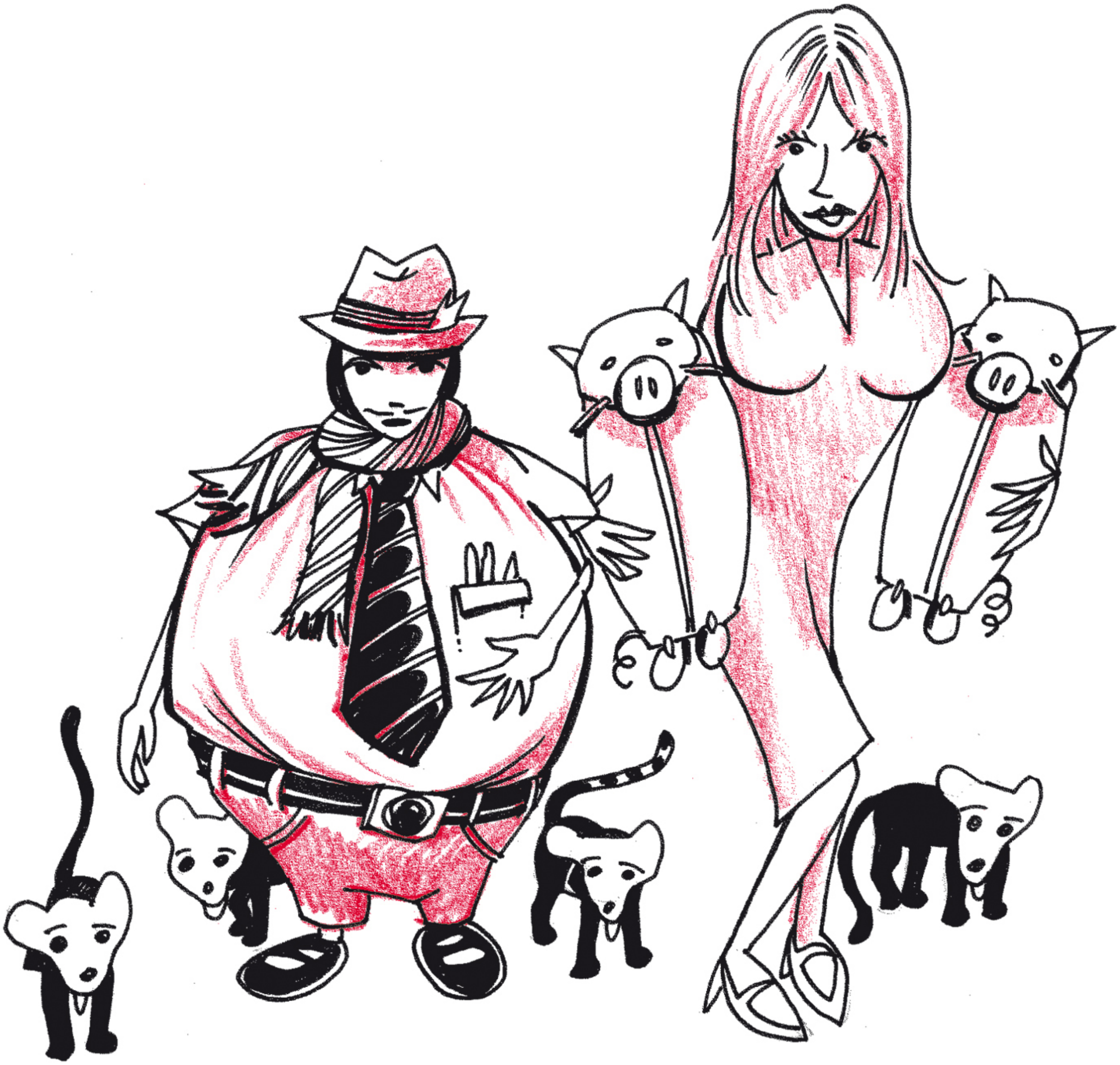
Me
[Shuddering at the thought.]
Well, let’s hope they’re done with you.
[SIGH. Note to self: Add “Rescue Jakey” to my Seasidetown to-do list.]
[Sound of Attikol’s thugs returning to the room.]
OK, Cousin, I’m sure you’ll know my plans the second I do…

Dradblam them for interrupting! I need way more time with Jakey. Would really like to know what led Attikol to Seasidetown in the first place. How did he partner up with this diabolical Dottie? And what in the tweezles made him ask her about ME?

Later

Decided it was no longer safe to stay at the hotel, seeing as how Concierge Dude would be able to ID me, so we have taken shelter elsewhere in town. Tried to find the entertainment value in disguising myself, Raven, the cats, and my trunks, and sneaking us all out past the concierge, various members of Attikol’s entourage, AND large “Have you seen me?” posters of myself…but am not super happy about being on the run. This was supposed to be a fun, rewarding, end-of-the-school-year getaway. I was expecting to just land in town, summon a large fountain of black rock without too much fuss, and spend the rest of my vacation in idle mischief.


HAVE YOU SEEN ME?
AGE: 13
4 cats
LAST SEEN WITH THIS WOMAN

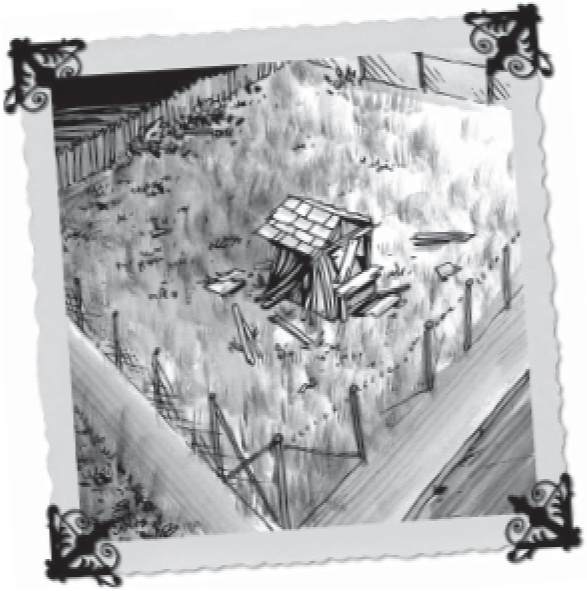


Instead we are hiding from the law in an abandoned souvenir kiosk in an otherwise empty lot. Same one Mystery brought us to the other night. The entire block is fenced off, which makes me feel slightly more secure. Still, no one is stoked to be here, and the Posse is letting me know it! All four cats have been yowling their disapproval, trying to climb the walls, and threatening to relaunch the bad behavior of the past week. It's not what I need right now!

Wish I had more info about what Attikol knows and what his plan is. Am in dire need of better intel. If only I had TranscriptoSpies all over town!

Oh hey—here's a thought…

It's time to put my troublesome felines to work for me.



Our current hiding spot.

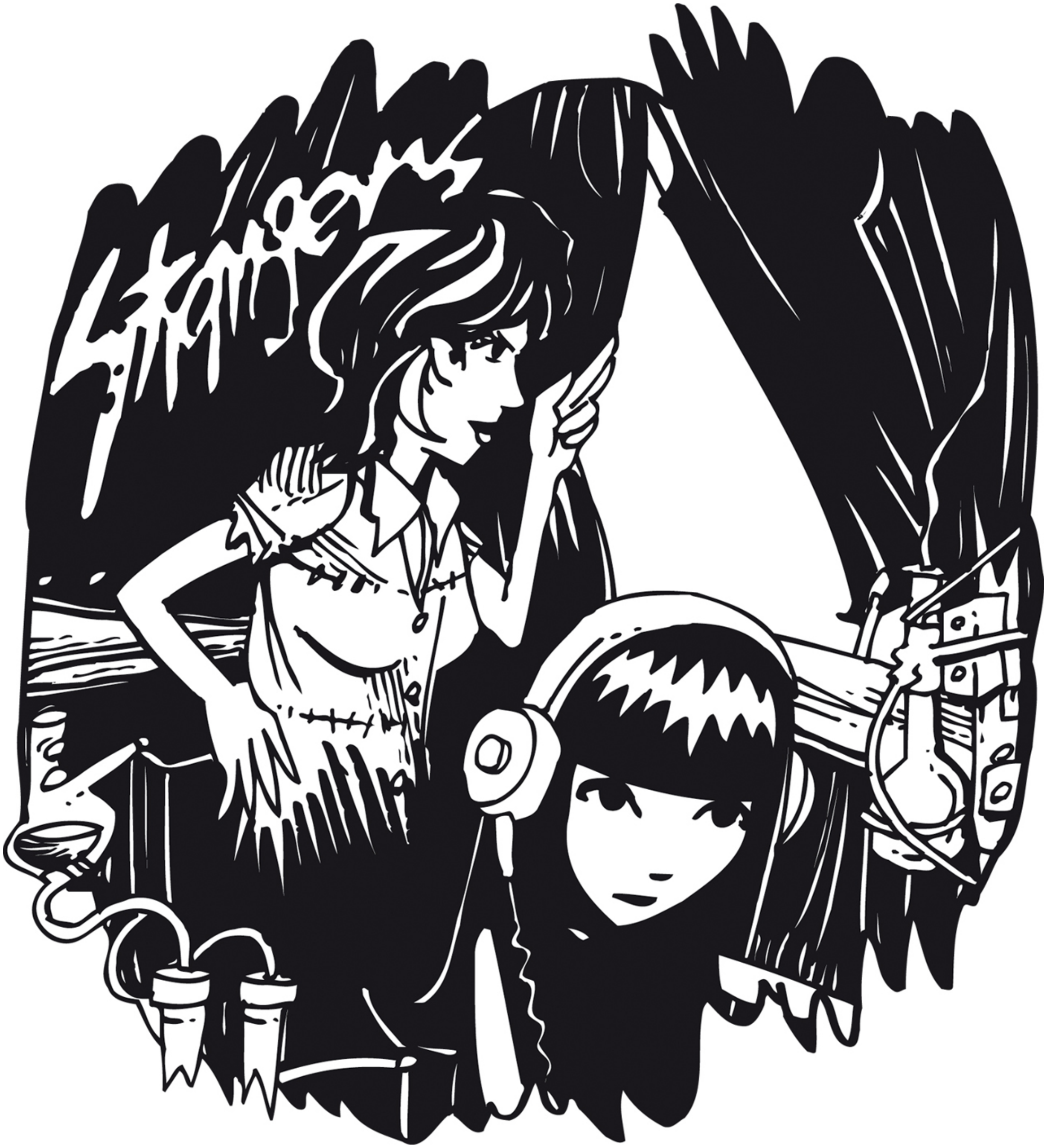
Later

The cats have gone undercover! I rigged TranscriptoSpies to each of their collars and gave them their missions. Miles has been assigned to lurk the halls of Seasidetown's oldest hotel. Sabbath is going to infiltrate the mayor's home and follow the Ebenezers in their travels around town. NeeChee will locate Attikol's caravan and keep tabs there. And Mystery is staking out Great-Aunt Lily's house for me.

Made sure they understand that I expect them home for dinner and snuggles every night. Gave them all some advice on safe espionage. And sent them on their way!

Later

Was feeling grumpy about spending my vacation in a rundown, abandoned souvenir kiosk instead of a fairly posh hotel. Then reflected that, really, the upside of being on the lam is that I'm staying in a rundown, abandoned souvenir kiosk instead of a fairly posh hotel. Have started customizing the kiosk to my heart's delight. Have hung spare black dresses over the windows, hot-glued garage-sale stuffed animals to the ceiling, installed portable lab and periscope, and spray-painted the walls with made-up band logos. Am blasting Mom’s mix tapes one after the other. (Through headphones. I AM lying low here.) The place is feeling much more homey and WAY cooler than that hotel room, with its tasteful decor and quiet, understated luxury. Who needs it? I am better off in a place where I can spill black cherry soda or hydrofluoric acid on the carpet, guilt-free.



Later

Am taking a break from kiosk-decorating to monitor the cats' TranscriptoFeeds. Here are some highlights:

Ümlaut
No! Not fire-walking! Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?

Attikol
Oh, yes, fire-walking…and sword-swallowing too! Now, you'd better get to work…your first show is tonight at seven! Ivac, have the mural on his trailer repainted right away, and administer thumbscrews if Ümlaut shows the slightest hesitation. Have I made myself clear?

Ü.
Yes…very clear…

Mayor Ebenezer
One more time, Dottie: I don't care how you spend your free time, as long as you do the forty hours of community service I signed you up for.

Dottie
Paint the school yourself! I'm going to the movies.

Later

Am wondering why the letter from my Dark Aunts didn't mention the Attikol factor. Back when Great-Aunt Emma sent me on that mission to Blackrock, her letter made sure to warn me that my ancestral enemy would be there, so that I could take proper precautions. And I wasn't even ready to summon black rock back then!

Am also a little surprised there was no mention that summoning black rock would be a challenge of any kind. Or maybe it's not that surprising. I

AM supposed to be coming into my full powers now. I guess the days of hand-holding are over, and I have to solve these problems on my own!

Later

Out and about! Once the kiosk was as decorated as any kiosk needs to be, I started feeling antsy to go reconnoiter. So Raven and I got our disguises on and spent a few good hours slinking around undercover. Allowed ourselves to get stopped and questioned by Seasidetown police, just to get a sense of the threat level. AHhahhHAHhhahHAHH. Right. Here's how THAT went:

Random Officer
Sorry to bother you, madam, but have you seen this girl? She's wanted in seventeen states!

Me
Why, yes…I'm pretty sure I spotted her in the grocery store in Salem!

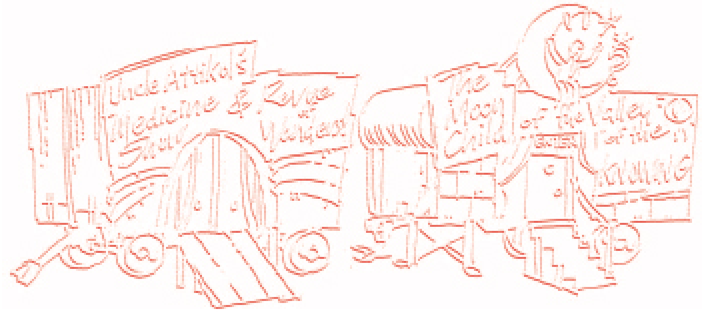
Anyway. Whom should we run into eventually but NeeChee, skulking around the outskirts of Attikol and Ümlaut's caravan. It's parked a few blocks from the hotel. They have repainted it since that artificial sandstorm I unleashed upon it back in Blackrock, but even so, I can see why Attikol is staying in the hotel instead—it looks like a super-sized child's circus train set, and not exactly the kind of lodging that's going to make a positive impression on a sophisticated woman like Mayor Ebenezer.

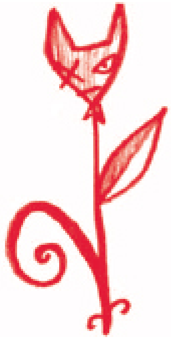
Seems they've been changing things up in the old medicine show since I last saw it. Poor Ümlaut—I have a feeling he's playing the Fire-Walker/Snake-Charmer/Sword-Swallower just because Attikol enjoys watching him suffer. At least I can be glad Jakey is only expected to be psychic and not fireproof as well!

Will think about coming back during open hours to see the show. Am SUPER glad I packed disguises.

Later-back at the kiosk

Almost daylight. Must get some rest. Have commanded Raven to stand watch. Am thankful golems have no need of sleep.





May 15

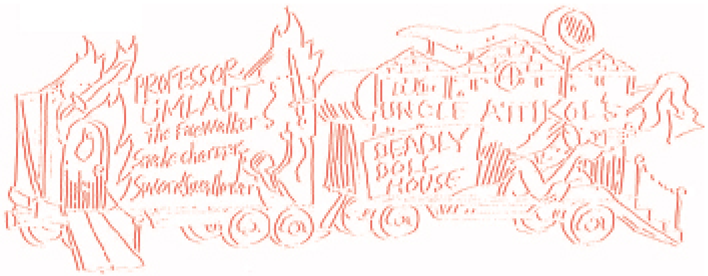
Follow your inner moonlight; don't hide the madness.
—Allen Ginsberg

Middle of the day—I should not be awake!!! Was enjoying a lovely, lovely nightmare about giant mutant yeti-spiders when I was brutally shaken out of sleep by loud knocking on the kiosk door. I opened my eyes in time to see Raven sneaking, fast'n'silent, over to the door. "POLICE," came a loud voice. "Anyone in there?" I held my breath. Waited for the door to be kicked in. Heard booted footsteps move around the kiosk, pausing near the windows. Then finally—"Ehh, this place has been empty a long time. Let's move on."

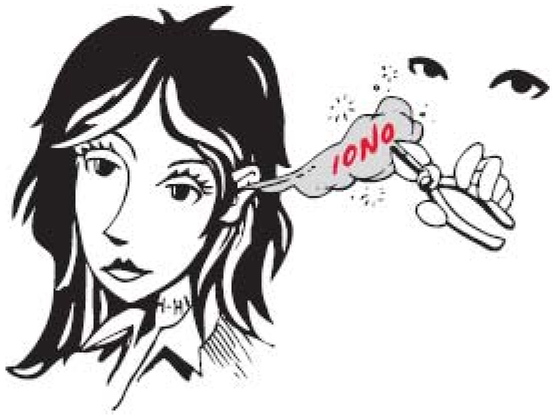
Am going back to sleep.

Later—just past sundown

Decided it would be time well spent if I devoted an hour to making sure my position was more secure. Have fortified the perimeter with a quick’n’dirty alarm system. Am breathing a little easier.



It’s kind of a peculiar place I’m finding myself in, this empty lot. I mean, it isn’t even paved. Good thing it’s fenced, or desperate tourists would be trying to park in it. All the plants in the lot are dead—black and crispy. I wondered at first if there’d been a fire, but the kiosk’s elderly paint job doesn’t have a single smoke smudge.



Later

Have devoted some serious contemplation to Dottie’s talent and how it might work. Thought pulling, man! It’s kind of a mindbender. Is it anything like how my ThoughtCorder works? When I built that thing, I had to really ponder the nature of thoughts and how to isolate certain ones out of the whole jumbly mind-mess so they could be recorded. Would LOVE to know more about how Dottie does what she does!

Am wondering if it might be wise to try to talk to her. If I learned more about how her talent works, it might be useful in future upgrades to the ThoughtCorder. On the other hand, I have to admit, the thought of meeting her gives me the super-heebie-jeebies. Because I REALLY don’t ever want to experience what she does firsthand! I can’t imagine the trauma of having MY OWN THOUGHTS ripped out of my mind by some freakish thought ripper of a girl.

Top 13 thoughts I must protect from Dottie:

1. Names, history, characteristics, and fond memories concerning my cats.
2. Anything to do with my family history, but most particularly the Dark Girls.
3. Spycraft training with Venus Fang Fang—I busted my cheeks for that stuff!
4. Esoteric knowledge of punk rock 45s from the 1970s and 1980s.
5. Detailed memories of the something like 1,313 rock shows I’ve been to so far.
6. Secret locations of all my heirlooms, keepsakes, memorabilia, thrift-store treasures, and other priceless belongings.
7. Methods for disarming the various booby traps set up in and around my room.
8. Passwords. Lots of passwords.
9. All my hard-earned skateboarding, escapology, Krav Maga, 13th-century poetry, sleight of hand, particle physics, lockpicking, and fingerpainting knowledge and skills.
10. Blueprints for the glorious Time-Out Machine.
11. Blueprints for the marvelous DuplicatoDevice.
12. Blueprints for the magnificent ThoughtCorder.
13. Oh flamfarx—who am I kidding? It’s ALL precious! SHE GETS NOTHING!!!!!

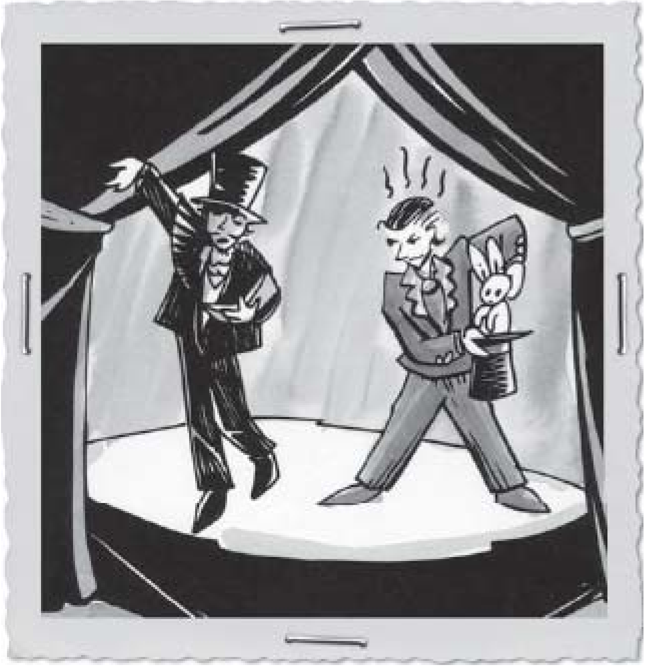
Later

I decided to take my mind off the diabolical Dottie by checking out Attikol’s revamped medicine show. In costume, of course! Well, what do you know? Attikol has renamed the show “The Uncle Boris Caravan of Wonders” and is doing his best to boost Uncle Boris’ popularity in Seasidetown by making sure everyone knows he (Attikol) is a descendant of the Great One. Every act is full of nonsensical pseudo-history about Boris. For example, during the magic show, Attikol made a total fool of himself by constantly reading silly quotes from Boris’ diary. (Don’t think for a second that Attikol was the magician! He doesn’t have the talent.)

Here is a brief (VERY BRIEF) excerpt, just to give the general flavor:

Attikol
Everyone in Seasidetown wants a bottle of my black potion! I will be wealth—AHEM—respected beyond belief. Dinner with the mayor tonight is certain!

He did the same during Ümlaut’s exhibition of fire-walking, sword-swallowing, and snake-charming, and then again during Jakey’s act. I did my best to cheer up Jakey by mentally sending him silly observations of the meathead tourists in the crowd but got no more than a raised eyebrow for my efforts. The kid is clearly losing heart, and it’s not hard to guess why—as soon as the Moon Child’s act was done, two of Attikol’s thugs escorted him roughly off stage.



No wonder I didn't get any early warning from him about Attikol's plans. He probably got my psychic requests just fine—there doesn't seem to be any limit to his range, at least when it comes to MY thoughts. But being under heavy guard, most likely without access to a phone, he couldn't get in touch with me. And then Dottie got to him and pulled all thoughts of me out of his mind. He wouldn't even have noticed when I got to town, because he no longer knew who I was!

Am seriously regretting that I didn't figure out a way to spring him from Attikol's caravan before this all went down. Of course, it was nice for a while to have a psychic ally in Attikol's crew, someone on the inside who could keep me posted on Attikol's doings. Well, in this case, my procrastination has back-fired—big-time!!!

Later

I should probably try to talk to Jakey again before his guards escort him back to the hotel. Luckily I've noticed that they take frequent breaks. Together. Leaving him alone in his trailer. Which has air vents I can easily unscrew.

Will tape in the TranscriptoFeeds if they are at all interesting.

Later

THEY WERE INTERESTING.

Me
So. Cousin. You’ve had a chance to catch up on our history, I guess?

Jakey
Yeah. Hope you don’t mind, I looked in your thoughts pretty freely.

Me
It’s cool—I need you informed! And I’m gonna need you to look around in Attikol’s mind for me too.

J.
Already on it. What should we start with?

Me
Where to begin? OK, how did Attikol find Dottie in the first place?

J.
She found him! He’s been bringing his show here to Seasidetown for years…she’s probably seen it dozens of times. We rolled into town last week, and she came up to him after a show, told him she was a thought puller, and hit him up for a job.

Me
And he gave her one.

J.
And asked her about something I would never tell him.

Me
Black rock.

J.
She suggested pulling thoughts from MY mind, since theoretically that would give her access to everyone in town. Well, I guess they hit the mother lode with that. You AND the black rock must have been in the thoughts she pulled, cuz that stuff is gone from my mind now…and Attikol knows all about YOU.

Me
[Feeling sick inside.]
Jakey, do you know the exact date when she pulled your knowledge of me and black rock?

J.
Sure, it was on May ninth—six days ago.

Me
[Paging frantically backward in my diary.]
Oh my friping thujones.

J.
What is it?

Me
Just some very important ancestral secrets, is all. Well, at least it doesn't look like Attikol knows about the letter I got from my aunts. And he still doesn't know I'm in town. That's something.

J.
I'm really sorry, Emily. I wish I could have stopped them!

Me
It’s cool, kid, I’ll figure this out. OH! Hey! I should have asked you this earlier—does Attikol know how to summon black rock? Quick, take a look right now if you can!

J.
OK, I’m…yeah, he’s in range…huh…that’s weird…

Me
Tell me tell me tell me, does he know how???
[Sounds of thugs returning to Jakey’s trailer.]

J.
Yes and no—

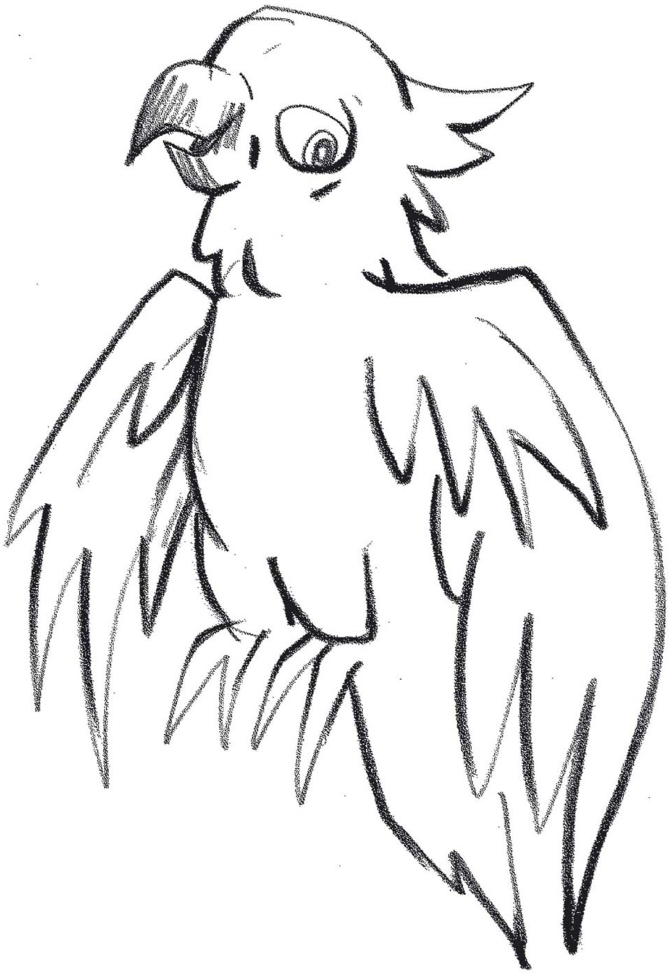
Me
[Frantically whispering.]
Which is it?!?!?!?!
[Door opens and thugs enter.]

J.
It’s hard to—

Thug
[Suspiciously.]
Who are you talking to?

J.
My parrot.

Lily Parrot
SQUAWK!



Jakey's parrot, Lily

T.
Shut it or I'll shut it for ya!

Later—lurking behind Jakey's trailer

Where are my Dead Dark Aunts when I really need them?

I need someone to tell me that Attikol does NOT know how to summon black rock.

That it can still be mine.

I'm just hoping hoping hoping so powerfully, it feels like I will burst my eyeballs with the force of my hoping, that when Jakey said "Yes and no" he meant "OH HAIRBALLS NO! Attikol?? Summon black rock??? You must be clear outta your skull!!!!"

Yeah. Surely that's what he meant by that.

In any case, I am not leaving this trailer until those thugs take another break.

Much Later

OK, so the news is…horrible? Wonderful? I just can't decide…

What Jakey found in Attikol's mind was complicated. Attikol did learn the method of summoning black rock from an old diary handed down to him from some ancestor.

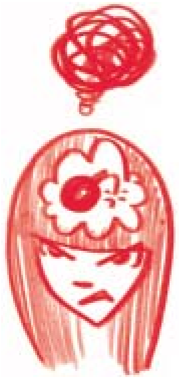
Thanks to Dottie's thought-ripping Jakey's knowledge of my conversation with my Dead Dark Aunts, Attikol ALSO knew I didn't know how to summon black rock.

He knew Jakey would give me this knowledge if he had the chance.

So he decided to protect that knowledge by having Dottie remove it from his own mind!!!!!!!!

Um…I actually gotta give Attikol credit for a minor stroke of brilliance on this one.

GABFLAX HIM!!

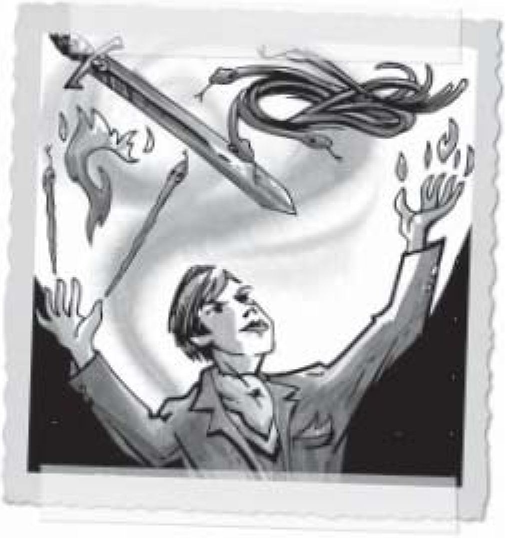


So yeah. DOTTIE possesses the secret of summoning black rock! Have asked Jakey if he could see it in her mind.

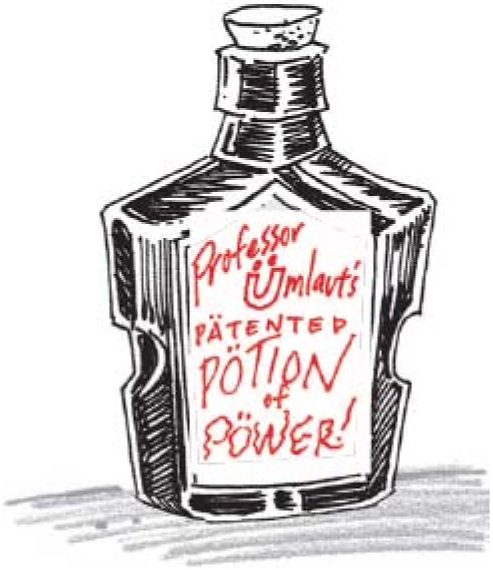
Not yet—he's gotta either know someone pretty well, or get within spitting distance, to read much—but he's going to keep trying. Also asked him to conduct a super-thorough exploration of Attikol's thoughts. Which I really appreciate. It's probably the mental equivalent of slogging through a sewer. A STUPID sewer.

Later—back at the kiosk

What with all this drama, I completely forgot to describe Ümlaut's act, which is AMAZING. He is actually a very talented fire-walker/sword-swallower/snake-charmer. Plus he has style. He doesn't just take out a sword and swallow it (though that is the first trick he does)—he puts that sword through paces! And he doesn't just walk through fire—he wears it, rides it, tames it, sculpts it, and swallows it. Oh, and he swallows the snakes too (they come out his fingertips, completely unharmed). Very impressive illusion!!!

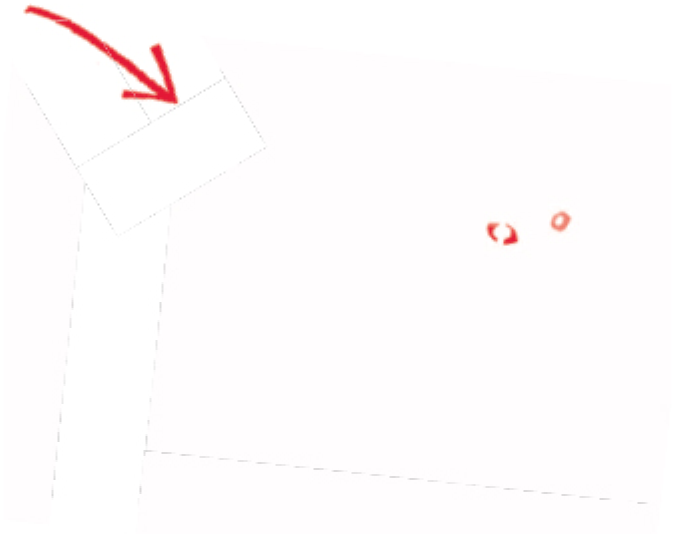


The final act of the evening was a major letdown, though. Attikol and Ümlaut shared the stage, trying to sell bottles of Professor Ümlaut's Pätented Pötion of Pöwer. The audience really wasn't going for it, even when Attikol told them it was based on Uncle Boris' Black Potion—the very same one that had cured all of Seasidetown of the white fever, more than two centuries ago. The nerve!!! His "cure" was MY aunt Lily's dark elixir/black rock, which Boris stole. Guhh!!!



Aside from the potion fakery, though, I have to be honest—if you took the Attikol out of Attikol's medicine show, then it wouldn't be bad entertainment. I guess their magician is a bit run-of-the-mill—he doesn't have the mastery that Ümlaut does for illusion. And personally I'd prefer some real-life freaks, daring feats of escapology, and maybe some spirit communication instead of the fire, sword, and snake stuff. Of course, in this day and age, there are no freaks left—everyone has been surgically normalized at birth. Even conjoined twins are rarely lucky enough to be left alone and unseparated. On the other hand, there's way TOO much spirit communication these days, and almost none of it is the least bit real—I should know, my dead Great-Aunt Millie told me so! As for the escape artists, no one respects the simple technical mastery of a lock anymore. No, you pretty much have to bust free from inside a vacuum cleaner while a swarm of flesh-eating bacteria nibbles your septum for anyone to be interested.

Chaaaa. Forget modern entertainment, anyway! At least I have my ThoughtCorder. Maybe later tonight I can spend a few comforting hours creating the escapology/spirit-talking/freak show of my dreams.



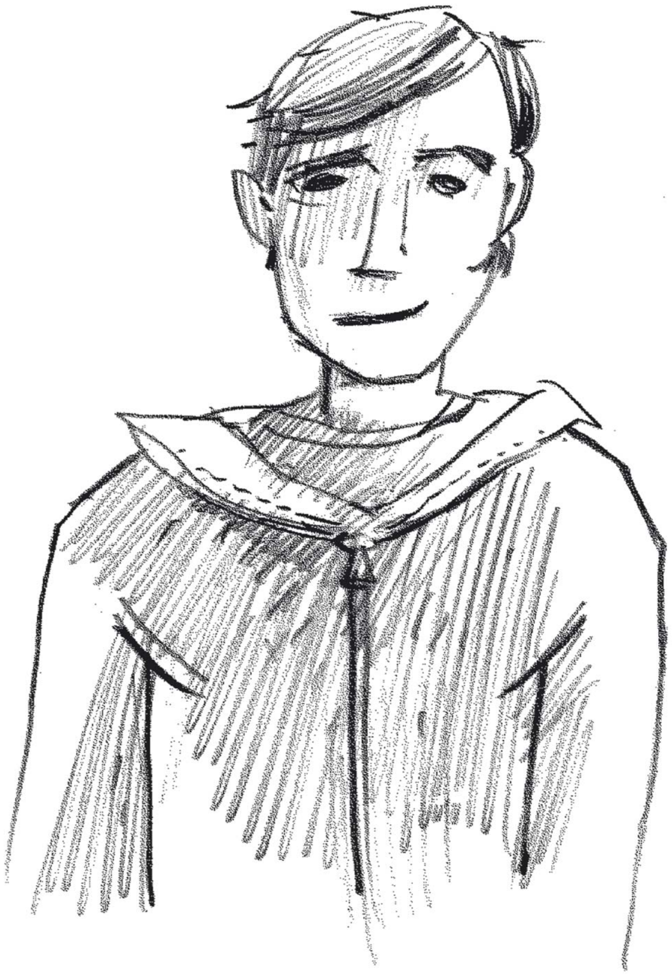
Later

Just got back from food run. Amazing coincidence (or is it, really?)—I ran into my old acquaintance Schneider at the grocery store! Had just barely made it through the doors before they closed up for the night—and there he was in the checkout line.

Me
Sup, Schneider.

Schneider
[Doing classic double take.]
Em…i…ly? What a surprise.

Me
Is it? Is it really, Schneider? I mean, you do know that my ancestors are from this town, right?



Schneider: Portrait of a semistalker.

S.
Well…yes.

Me
Dude, you are THEE most stalkerish person I have ever semi-trusted. You are so lucky Great-Aunt Emma liked you.

S.
Uh…thanks. Look, I have a perfectly good reason to be in Seasidetown. Let’s see, last time we talked, your Aunt Emma’s old house in Blackrock had mysteriously evaporated, leaving me kind of homeless.

Me

Right. Did you find another place to live? You said there was some insurance money?

S.
There was. I wasn’t sure where to go, and I was feeling kind of interested in your family history after such a bizarre episode. I mean, EMMA’S family history. It was a pretty unique house, if you’ll recall. Even aside from the vanishing act. I thought I might figure out where it went if I tracked down some of the LeStrande/Strange history. Along the way I learned that Emma’s Great-Aunt Lily Étrange lived here in the late eighteenth century…and they’ve got a great historical library…so I’m living here now. If that’s stalkerish, well, I’m sorry.

Me
Oh, chill, Schneider. Stalk me all you want. I can handle it. Did you know that Attikol’s in town too?

S.
Yes, I saw his caravan. Do you know what he’s doing here?

Me
Stalking me and/or my ancestors. The national flabberflacking pastime.

Sheesh! Anyway, as it turns out, Schneider is the new head librarian (as well as the town dogcatcher—good old Schneider!!—AND chief crossing guard). Have informed him that he might come in handy in case I need any historical information on my ancestors. Should save me from going to the library during daylight hours.

Later

Feline TranscriptoSpies have started to pay off in intel. Here is an unsettling highlight:

Attikol

[Into his phone.]
I’m going to need a full team of engineers in Seasidetown by tomorrow. And a fully equipped lab. Spare no expense.
…

Let’s just say that I need you to build several very special devices for me.
…

[Irritated.]
I can’t help you with that. YOU’RE the engineer!
…

I don’t HAVE the specifications yet. All in good time! Just get your team here as soon as you can!

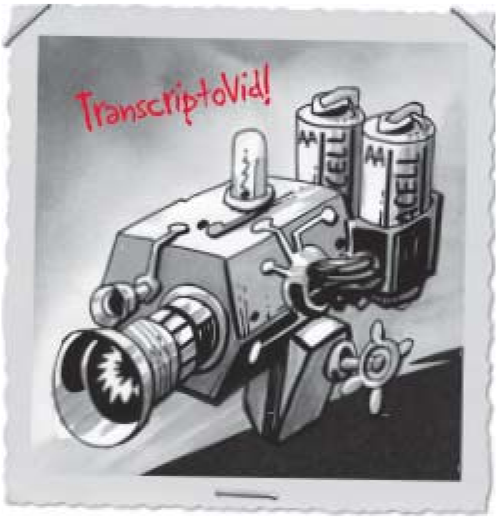
Am super uneasy to find Attikol talking about “very special devices.” Why is he being so vague? Why doesn’t he have specifications for these devices? And…how’s he going to get said specifications?

I really hope this has nothing to do with his need to find ME.

But given his fascination with black rock, I suspect that it does!

Later

OK. Am thinking that, for a start, it would help to beef up my surveillance on Attikol. Am going to add video capability to some of the TranscriptoSpies. I think I can scrounge the necessary parts right here in the souvenir kiosk. Will report back on my progress.



TranscriptoVid!

Later

Not bad work considering my limited resources! Have spent the past hour dismantling cheap souvenirs and scavenging them for bits and pieces. Have managed to cobble together a TranscriptoVid with sixty-six-hour video storage. Am going to head back to the Boardroom and swap it for the old model. Am not super happy about visiting the Boardroom again, tainted as it is by Attikol’s presence. Will have to burn some catnip in there, or something, to purify the energy. Ha! Ha!

Later

Back at the kiosk. Feeling a little off. Probably just anxiety over the diceyness of the situation here in Seasidetown. Am going to just chill for the rest of the night. Will write more later.

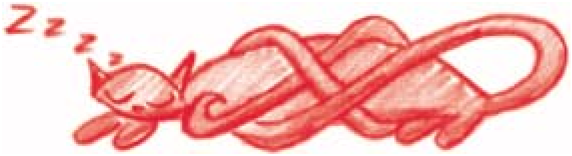
Later

Ended up rewiring the kiosk’s ancient (like, circa 1990s!) computer to get TV signals, then sat around in a nest of black dresses and watched late-night TV for several hours. Am surprised at myself. I mean, I’m the first to admit to being Queen of Procrastination but have never stooped to actual hours of TV viewing. Must be more productive tomorrow. Must figure out Attikol’s plans and a way to thwart them. Must summon black rock. Must…get…some…rest…

May 16

My medulla oblongata’s
Mushy like an old tomata
Cerebellum’s lost at sea
Temporal lobe, where can you be?
Corpus callosum void and null
I got no brains inside this skull
Hippocampus come back to me
I’M A PRETEEN LOBOTOMY!!!!
—From the poetry journal of Emily Strange, age 7

Woke up VERRRRY out of sorts. Probably due to unprecedented hours of TV last night. Guh! Am not feeling up to Master Planning and Counterespionage. Would not be averse to a few more hours of TV. Unfortunately the situation demands action, so I am gonna have to drag my carcass out of this kiosk and take care of business. Will write more later. If I have the strength.



Later

WHOOOOOOOOOOOOAH bad stuff bad stuff bad stuff

Here is the latest from the FelinoTranscriptoFeed:

Attikol
Congratulations on your new post as Head Librarian!

Schneider

Thank you. It’s quite an honor.

A.
You’re probably already aware that my family has been very prominent in this town for centuries.

S.
Is that so?

A.
Indeed! In fact, my Uncle Boris single-handedly saved the town from an outbreak of white fever in 1790.

S.
Fascinating!

A.
I presume your new duties are keeping you busy. Perhaps you haven’t had the time yet to peruse my family records, but there is 1300 years’ worth of documentation on us stored in your library.

S.
Remarkable! Is that what brings you to Seasidetown, then?

A.
That, and an inheritance I’ve come to collect. Which brings me to the reason for my visit. You are Seasidetown’s only licensed private investigator, I believe.

S.
I am indeed.

A.
I need you to locate this inheritance for me. I must warn you, this will sound quite unusual, but I’m looking for a black liquid, possibly in the form of a pool or fountain, that will have recently appeared somewhere in Seasidetown.

AAIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!

Attikol has summoned black rock

Well, that’s that. I have failed my family. And myself. I will never again know the joys of frolicking in a fountain of molten black rock. And never discover my unique talent. May as well pack my stuff and head home.

OK…Wait just a moment…his conversation with Schneider happened five hours ago.

Why haven’t I heard from Schneider?

Is he not planning to inform me?

Or…is he just avoiding me like the loser of black rock that I am?

Later

Have heard from Schneider. Am VERY surprised to be writing this, but he has actually made me feel a tiny bit better.

Schneider
Sorry I didn’t tell you right away. I thought it was best to get the search started immediately so that I had some good news to share.

Me
Huh. Good news. Riiiiight.

S.
Oh, come on. If Attikol had really summoned black rock, don't you think he would KNOW WHERE IT WAS?

Me
I guess. Maybe.

S.
Well, keep your chin up. I'm all over the case. If ANYONE in this town sees an unusual black liquid, I'll be the first to know!

OK—it's not a lot, but it's all I have, so I'm clinging to it with all my strength!

Am glad Attikol is a born delegator. If he were the kind of guy who took care of important business himself, I might still be in the dark here. Am also feeling grateful that Seasidetown's only private detective is willing to play Double Agent and keep me informed of Attikol's doings. And that his affection for my dead Great-Aunt Emma means he will go out of his way to help ME.

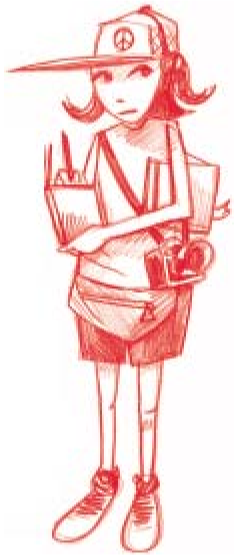
Anyway, despite trying reeeeeeally hard not to fall into a bottomless pit of despair, I am not happy, and Schneider was clearly feeling bad for me. He has suggested that we take a look at Attikol's family records. Could be helpful, I guess. Schneider's going to bring them to me tomorrow.

I don't have high hopes.

Later

It took about twenty-three minutes after the above entry for me to fall back into a—well, not a BOTTOMLESS pit of despair, but at least a medium-sized ditch of despair. Was gripped with fear that Attikol had indeed summoned black rock. Decided I might learn something by observing him. Thus I'm sitting in the crowd at the medicine show right now. Am dressed as a tourist.

I was actually able to follow Attikol around quite a bit since it is far beneath him to take notice of the customers (unless they are of romantic interest). He can't possibly be liked much around the caravan. He manages to be both distant and abrasive to everyone. He saves his special contempt for Ümlaut, though. I witnessed a lot of insults and kicking in their interactions. Eventually decided that this was not the euphoric, self-assured behavior of someone who has actually summoned an ancestral treasure, but the insecure, slightly panicky conduct of a man in a fit of anxiety.



This did wonders for my mood. Have upgraded to a mere cavity of despair. Not bad, not bad. Still need to talk to Jakey and confirm some things with him, though.

Later

Just witnessed funny scene of Seasidetown police scanning the medicine-show crowd for me. I know they were looking for me because they were holding posters of my face for reference. I made eye contact and gave them a long look at me. There was no spark of recognition. Zang, my disguises are good!

Later

After getting sick of watching Attikol, I stationed myself at Jakey's trailer and waited until his guards took a break. I knew I needed a good, long session with him this time, so I took steps to make sure we were not interrupted. Steps that included Raven (dressed as an alluring redhead), some lies about a flat tire, and, yes, some beverages laced with glycoloid resin. It'll take them at least an hour to sleep that off!

Me
Dude! Attikol is looking around town for black rock!

Jakey
Yeah…sorry, I should have told you. He thinks he might have summoned it. He's not sure, though.

Me
I kind of need to know these things, man.

J.
JI just didn't think it was worth freaking you out before we knew. I mean, I thought I'd be able to get some information out of Dottie's mind by now.

Me
And you can't?

J.
I can see HER thoughts, as long as she's close enough—but nothing that she's pulled from someone else.

Me
Aw, flizzles.

J.
I'll keep trying, though. Maybe I'll figure out how.

Me
Thanks. Right now, I really need to know more about Attikol's mind, though. What exactly does he know about black rock?

J.
THAT I can tell you…

Oh boy…Jakey has told me an earful. Here are the high points:

1. Attikol inherited his great-uncle Boris' diary a while back.
2. Turns out, though, this diary contained a reference to ANOTHER, earlier, diary…that of Great-Uncle Alaczar, which Attikol recently located…in the tunnels under Great-Aunt Lily's house!!!!
3. I was correct in surmising that Jakey has been under heavy guard for a while. Seems his obvious unhappiness made Attikol suspect him of wanting to run away. Otherwise, he'd have warned me at that point. He apologized again and again for not being able to!
4. Anyway, Uncle Alaczar's diary gave Attikol his first clear idea of black rock, which Alaczar described as "a great treassure that bringeth imagination to life, and wich hath been stollen from us by those accursed womyn."
5. Alaczar also recounted the legend that I heard from Aunt Emma: that the 13th Shady Uncle would have a chance to gain control of the black rock if he could summon it before the 13th Dark Girl did.
6. Plus summoning instructions…subsequently ripped from Attikol's mind.
7. And some intriguing snippets about none other than Dottie's ancestors: "These Bryte Girls, darke of skin and strong of talente, can be swayed by golde, but only until the pryde comes upon them."
8. Attikol ordered Jakey to search Seasidetown's citizens' minds for intel on black rock.

9. Though Jakey did his best to pretend that “black rock” meant nothing to him, he is not the world’s most talented liar. Attikol never really believed that he wasn’t finding anything.
10. So he was happy to pay an enterprising young thought puller to forcibly rip said intel out of his rebellious psychic’s mind.
11. But Attikol was SUPER surprised at the sheer wealth of what Dottie did find: the whole history of the times I’ve outwitted him, and everything Jakey knew from me about black rock.
12. Plus knowledge of some of my cool and potentially valuable inventions, which Attikol is determined to possess as well.
13. Knowing now that Jakey would help me if he could, Attikol paid Dottie to rip the most sensitive information from both their minds.

I thanked Jakey heartily for all this inside information and assured him that I would, eventually, somehow, rescue him from Attikol forever.

Me
You hanging in there, kid? They’re not…hurting you, are they?

Jakey
Nah. After all, I gotta do two shows a night. Wouldn’t look good if I was bruised.

Me
Well, that’s something. Hey, so what about Dottie’s thoughts? Anything I should know? Any good dirt?

J.
Not really sure. She doesn’t get along with her mom too well—I saw that nice and clear. And that NannyGuard who’s always with her? Dottie doesn’t like her much either.

Me
Why does Dottie need protecting, anyway?

J.
It’s Mayor Ebenezer who needs protecting. From Dottie and her scary talent.

Me
Wow, creepy.

J.
Oh…I’m picking up something from her now. Looks like she’s actually coming to see the show. I’ll do a good scan of her tonight if I can.

Me
Yeah, pick that brain good for me! Here’s hoping for some juicy nuggets.

J.
Do you have to say “juicy nuggets" when you talk about BRAINS?

Me
Yes. Yes I do. OK, kid, I’m outty. I bugged your trailer, so give me a “Flabjax!" if you need anything!

All right—Ümlaut’s show is starting. More later!

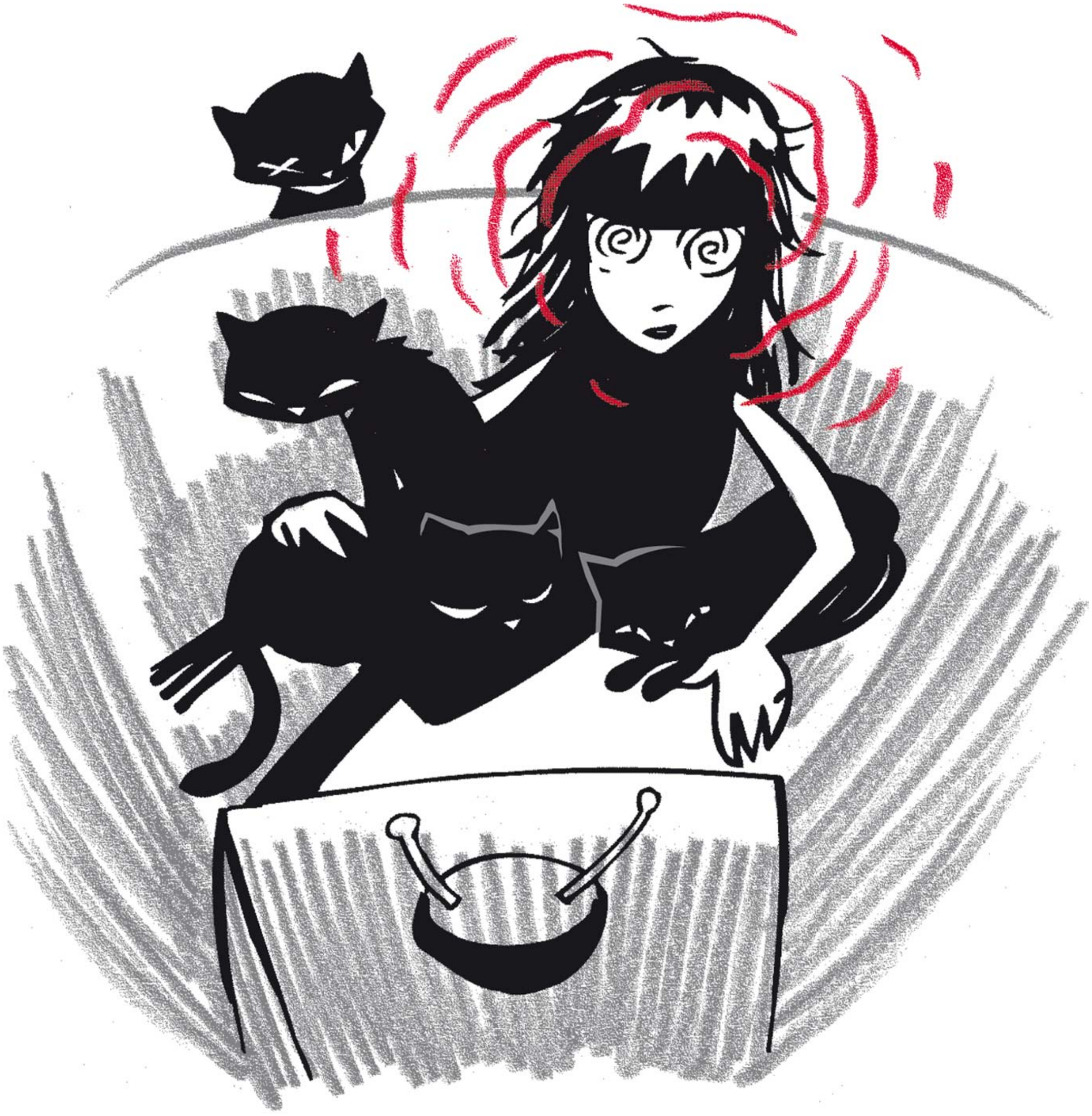
Later-back at the kiosk

Intense mental fatigue. I MUST be coming down with a bug, causing brain to turn to snot, or something. Hopefully it is not a new mutation of ye olde white fever, resistant to all inoculations!!!!! Since I have no dark elixir, black rock, or Pätented Pötion of Pöwer here to cure me. Ha. Ha. Ha. Luckily the cats are home for dinner. They can obviously tell I am poorly, because they are all staring at me anxiously. Will get them in a purring pile on my chest once I’m done writing. This usually works wonders in warding off illness or bad moods.

Just in case, have made sure Raven is properly programmed to get me to an emergency room if I collapse.

Later

No collapse as of yet. Unless you count watching FIVE STRAIGHT HOURS of television. Definitely a record for me. Not one I am proud of setting, either. Am clearly ailing. No real symptoms, though. Nothing solid to tell a doctor. “Well, I was feeling kind of generally unmotivated, Doctor, and all I wanted was to sit around and watch TV instead of coming up with clever master plans for defeating my ancestral enemy.” Right. Half 75% 95% of the population suffers from THAT malady.



Later

Am I ill? Feverish? Soft in the brain? What in flakes is wrong with me, sitting around in front of the TV all night? Must tear myself away and make some progress on the Plan. How can I summon black rock AND keep it away from Attikol? How can I rescue Jakey from Attikol's clutches before more of his mind is sucked away?

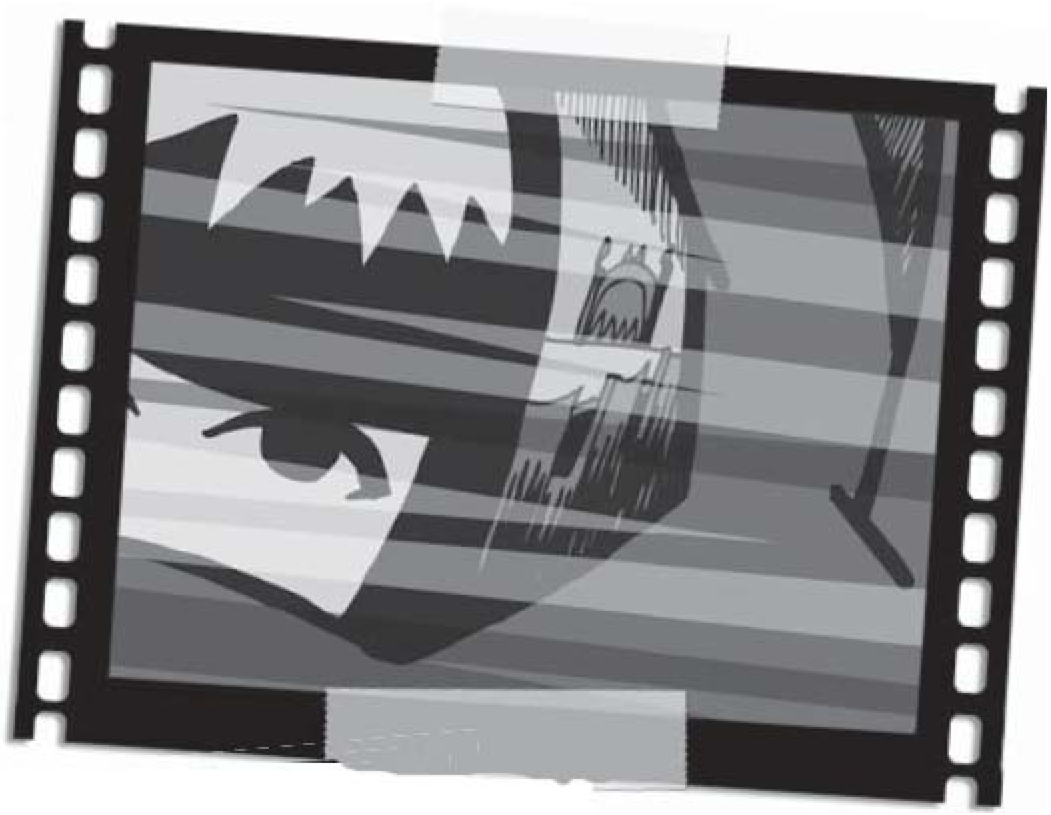
Am struggling to pull myself out of this slump. Will at least check TranscriptoFeeds. Will report back if anything looks interesting.

Later-oh my cheeks

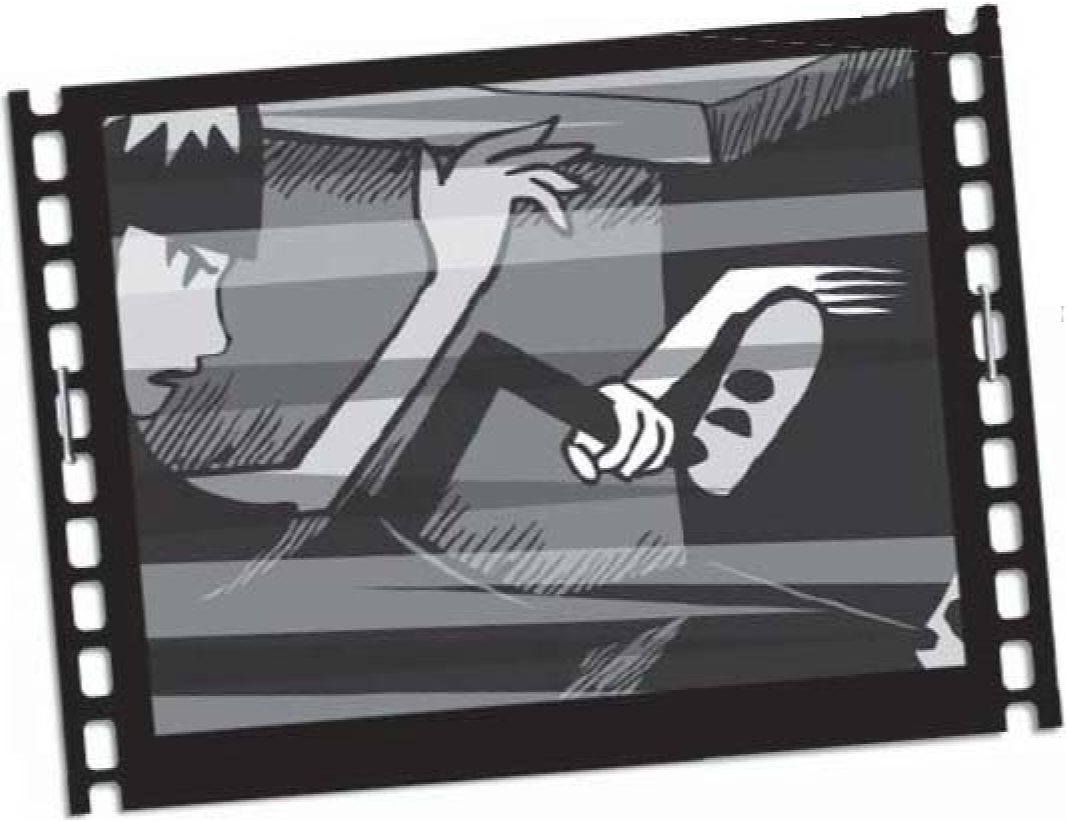
DOTTIE HAS BEEN IN MY MIND!!!!!!
MY THOUGHTS HAVE BEEN PLUNDERED!!!!!!!!
I WILL DESTROY HER!!!!!!!!!!!

Must. Get. Control. Of. Myself.
So. I. Can. Make. Ultimate. Revenge. Plan.
THAT GIRL IS GOING **DOWN!!!!!!!!!!!!**

OK. Have watched the video and read the transcripts of yesterday's visit to the Boardroom. Here's what happened:



11:23 p.m. First image from TranscriptoVid. Image then jumps around quite a bit as I adjust the view frame until the entire table is visible.

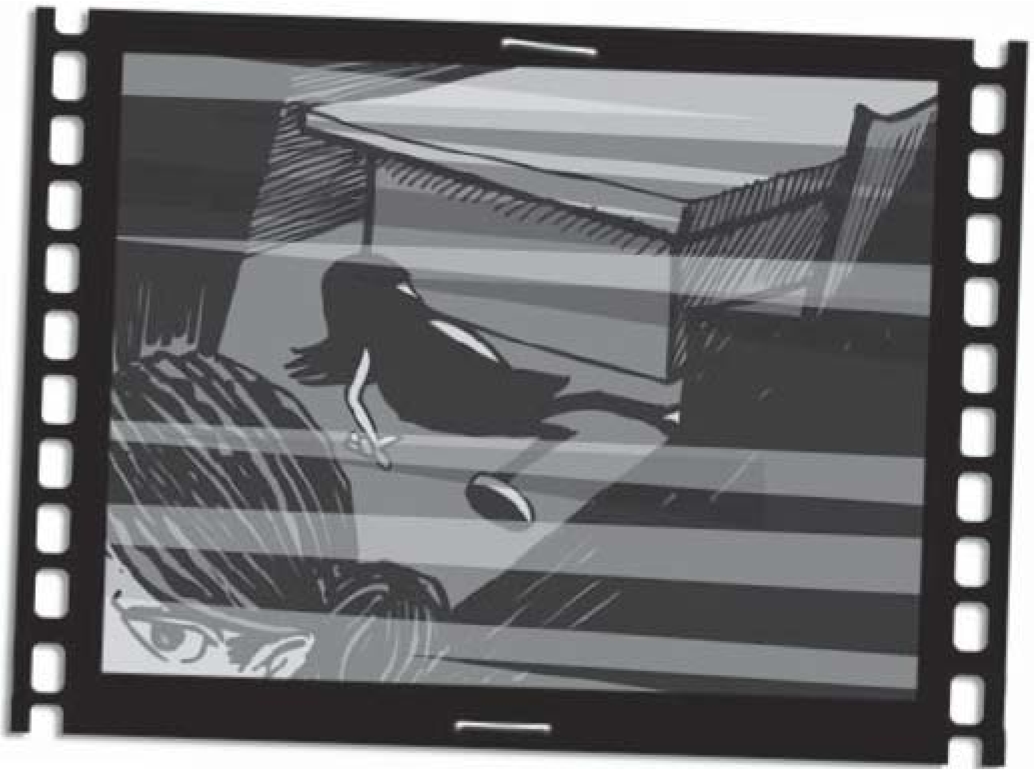


11:27 p.m. I appear in the view frame, walking up to one of the chairs and starting to inspect it. Suddenly I jerk away from the table, then turn quickly back toward the doorway—but then lurch back and fall on my butt. There is a HAND gripping my ankle!

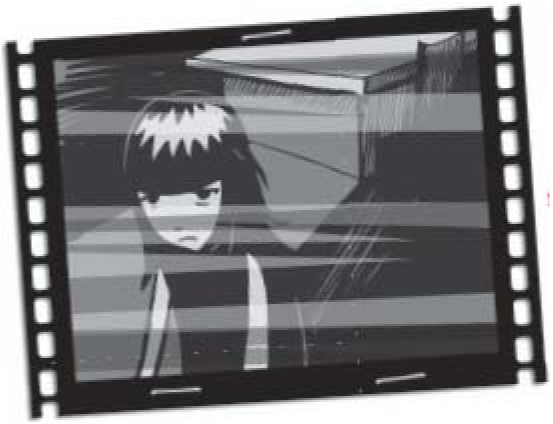
Dottie
Gotcha! Let's see—I'll go for the DuplicatoDevice first…

Me
Aiiiierrrrghhhhhhh…

D.
[GRUNTING NOISES—approx. three minutes.]
Whew…OK…Now let's get your memory of THIS little incident…
[GRUNTING NOISES—approx. one minute.]
There we go. Ugh, that's about all I can handle of YOUR mind for tonight, weirdo. Catch ya on the flip side.



11:33 p.m. Dottie scrambles out from under the Boardroom table and leaves the room. I remain, lying halfway under the table, out cold, for the next thirty-eight minutes.



12:11 p.m. I slowly get to my feet and stagger out of the Boardroom, face blank, eyes foggy.

Oh NOOOOOOOOO! The wondrous DuplicatoDevice! Have lost all memories pertaining to building and using it. This is TRAGIC!!!! Am tempted to call up Mom right away and see what she knows. Do I still have the device? What kind of cool stuff did I duplicate with it? Did I make actual written blueprints? Probably not—haven't been that formal with my contraption-building since I was four years old. Am sure it took a lot of experimenting to get something that complex working. If I can't build another one, can I use the DuplicatoDevice to duplicate ITSELF? Oh no—what if I broke it down to use the parts in another contraption?

Cannot write any more. Too heartsick. More later.

Later

Must focus on preventing Dottie from getting in my mind again. From now on, I travel with a bodyguard. Raven will accompany me everywhere! Have shown her the video of Dottie and commanded her to keep that girl from touching me, no matter what!

Later OH NO OH NO OH NO

Dottie has already gotten in my mind again! Just reread my list of "Top 13 thoughts I must protect from Dottie"—and I have no memory of any glorious Time-Out Machine!!! Must stop writing and check TranscriptoFeeds…more later!

Later

Oh the diabolical evil of Dottie!!!!!! Have scanned the feeds until I found this one:

Jakey
Flabjax! FLAB JAX!!

Eye-patch Thug
Whuh?

J.
Oh…nothing…

E.T.
Well, keep it under your hat, ya freak.

J.
[Singing, as if to himself, to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”] Dottie, Dottie, psychic thief, Sneaking up, your thoughts to keep. Reaching toward you with her toe While you watch the magic show. Ripped your thoughts, now she must pay. It’s too late, she got away.

E.T.
Can it, kid, or I’ll can it for ya!

Poor Jakey! He tried to warn me—he saw it all in her mind as it happened. What a disaster!!! And NeeChee wasn’t around either, unluckily. His transcripts from this time frame are full of nothing but endless “PRrrrPRrrrPRrrrrrrrr”—he was probably enjoying a snuggle-dream under someone’s trailer.

Am feeling furious and fired up for action. Am going to take Raven with me over to the mayor’s house, sneak in, and confront Dottie. She’s not getting in my mind a third time!!!

Later

Wow…

Some VERY interesting stuff has transpired!

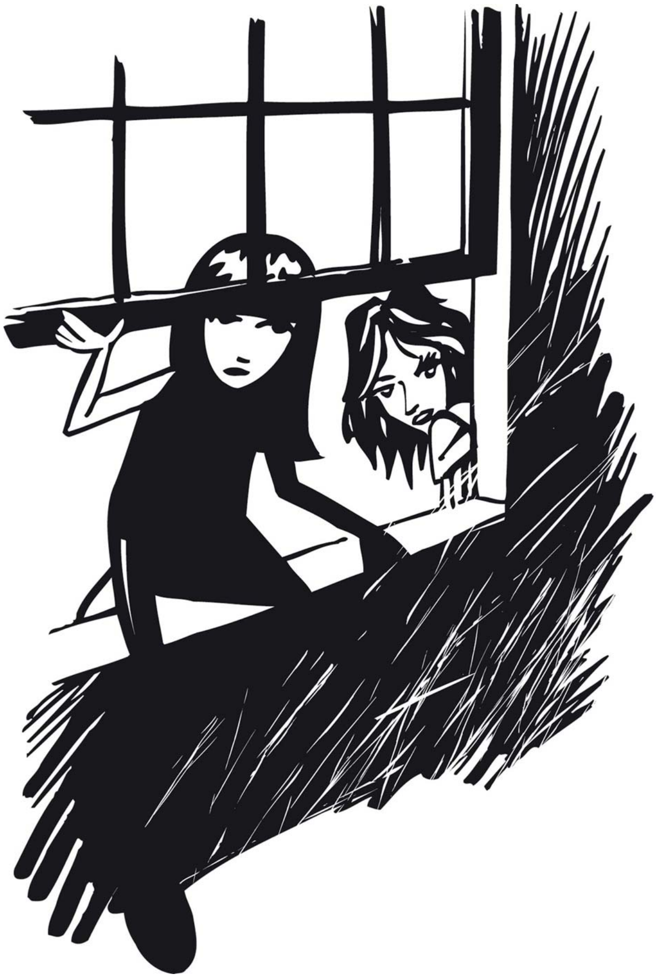
First off—I don’t mind admitting I was feeling QUITE unsettled by the prospect of confronting Dottie. There are very few things a person could do to me that freak me out as much as forceful thought-thievery! So I checked and double-checked Raven’s programming, gave myself a brisk pep talk, and (OK, it’s true) spent a few moments in a pile of black cats gathering my courage before finally leaving the souvenir kiosk.

It was not hard finding the mayor’s mansion. It’s right where it was in 1790, albeit quite remodeled (for the worse, I might add). Somehow the remodel makes it look WAY more Revolutionary Era than it was in the actual Revolutionary Era. Not exactly sure how they achieved that effect, but the addition of bronze statues of Revolutionary Era folk probably has something to do with it. Massive sign proclaiming the tour schedule definitely contributes. Souvenir kiosk selling flags, Uncle Boris Prestidigitation Paraphernalia, and other “historical” novelties is no doubt partly to blame.

Curious: I still have memories of coming to Seasidetown in 1790, but not of the actual device that brought me here. Interesting how she took some thoughts and not others—GAHHHH! Am I ACTUALLY reflecting on the “INTERESTING” aspects of that freak’s monstrous talent???? PHLEBBBHHH!!!!!

>Sigh.<

Anyway. I took a moment to shake my head yet again at the abomination that is modern-day Seasidetown; then Raven and I commenced to sneaking in.



Sneaking in was not hard. The mayor could use some consulting on her security system.

Getting past NannyGuard was also not hard. We found her snoring in a recliner in front of the TV. Tiptoed around her without a problem.

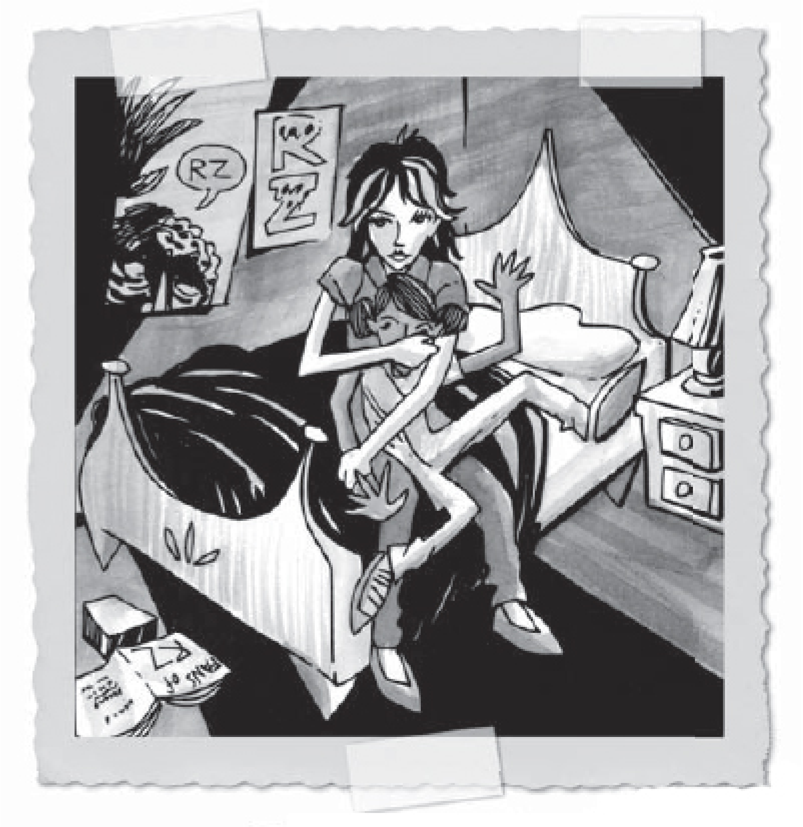
Finding Dottie's room was equally not hard. There was a trail of typical teenage-style paraphernalia (clothing, makeup, magazines, etc.) leading straight to it. Grakbats, it was kind of embarrassing. I may not be the world's tidiest teen (correction: I am MOST CERTAINLY one of the world's UNTIDIEST teens), but one thing you'll never catch me doing is leaving a trail of my stuff all over the house. Mostly because A) you never know who might find it interesting and make off with it, and B) if no one DOES take it, a feline is bound to claw it, chew it, or regurgitate something foul on it.

But I digress.

We slunk silently upstairs, following the trail of untidiness.

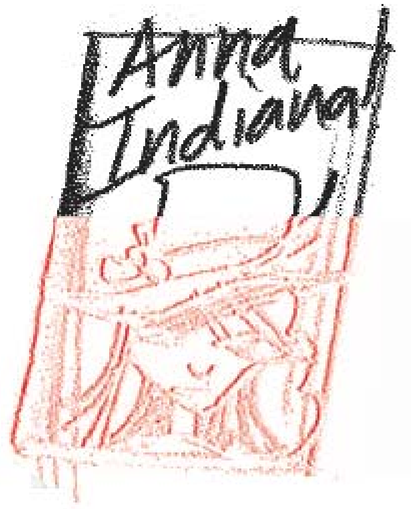
At the top of the stairs we came to a bedroom door plastered with stickers. (Man, I guess Dottie thinks they'll be living in the mayor's mansion for a long time!) Raven sloooowly turned the doorknob. And slooooowly opened the door.

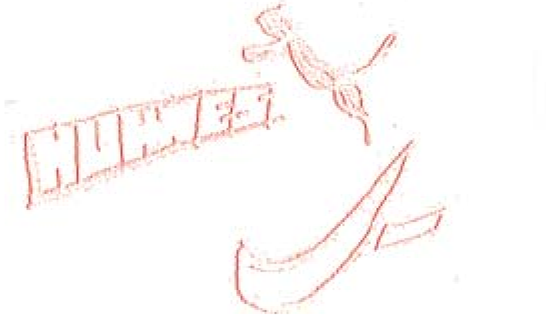
How anticlimactic! Dottie was fast asleep in bed. I motioned to Raven, who tiptoed over, then pounced, wrapping Dottie in super-strong golem arms, one hand over her mouth, while I stood a nice safe distance away.

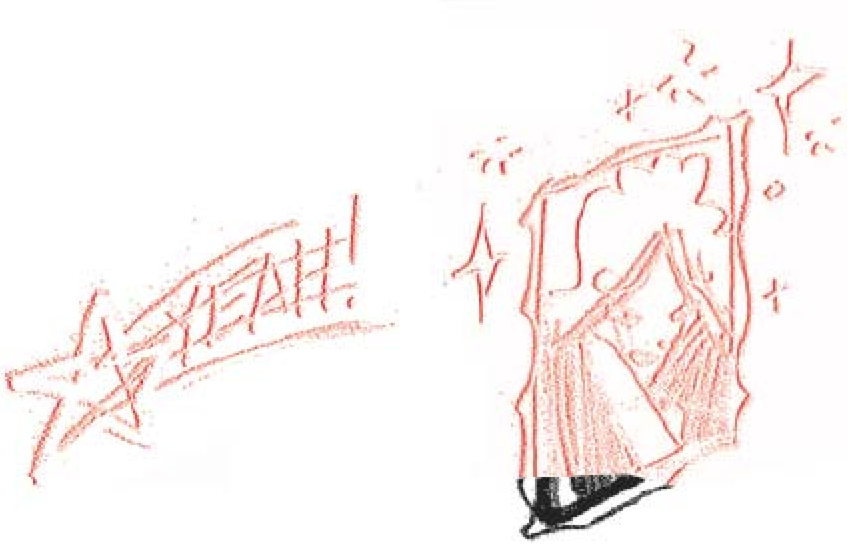


Me
Listen up, Dottie, Raven here is plenty strong enough to make you regret yelling. So be nice and quiet, and let’s have a little chat, K?

Dottie
[Eyes blinking wildly.]


Anna Indiana





Me
Uh, Raven, is she trying to nod? Could you relax that iron grip just a tad?

D.
[Nodding.]

Me
OK, Raven, ease up on the mouth a little and we’ll see if Dottie can behave.

D.
HHEE—
[Cry choked off immediately by Raven’s hand.]

Me
Oh, that’s no good at all. Raven, commence Regret Maneuver A.

Raven
[Applying vicious chin-noogie to Dottie’s scalp.]

Me
[Watching Dottie’s face until I felt her regret levels were sufficient.]
OK, Raven, let’s give her another chance. You ready to chat politely, Dottie? Cuz Raven’s also programmed for Regret Maneuvers B through Z.

D.
[Whispering furiously.] What’s WITH this person, I can’t get anything out of her mind!

Me
No, no, you wouldn’t. She doesn’t really HAVE a mind, per se. Just a wee little birdbrain, and some really first-class programming. But let’s talk about you and me, shall we? About how you attacked me—TWICE—and stole my THOUGHTS! SO uncool, man! To start with, how did you find me in the Boardroom?

D.
[Angry silence.]

Me

Go ahead with Regret Maneuver B, Raven.

D.
No! I'll talk! I was…um…looking for you, actually. I knew it was an important spot and you'd eventually show up there. Attikol's offering a big reward for you, since the police aren't making any progress.

Me
What does Attikol want me for?

D.
The plans for your inventions.

Me
Well, you got those.

D.
Yeah, I got them! And what're you gonna do about it?

Me
[Sighing.]
Cut out your brain and eat it, I guess. Unless you know a better way to get me back my thoughts.

D.
AIE—
[Screech choked off immediately by Raven's hand.]

Me
Well, Dottie? DO you have a better idea?

D.
My notes are over there on my desk, OK? Just don't eat my brain!

Me
[Snatching up said notes. Oh the blessed notes! Thank cheeses, they looked long and pretty thorough.]
Oh, give it a rest, I'm not gonna eat your brain. But only because I'm a vegetarian. However, I should warn you that eXtreme vengeance is a particular hobby of mine. And I'm VERY creative. Now, one more question: How is black rock summoned?

D.
Ummm…here…let me get a pen…

So yeah. I have in my hand…
Wait for it…

Instructions for summoning black rock!
Here they are:

Be pure of heart and long of limb Full of grace and free from sin Stand under a six days' moon And trace the ancient summoning rune Then black rock shall be yours soon!

The amazing thing is: I DEFINITELY recognize this! I wonder if my Dead Dark Aunts have, like, I don't know, whispered this to me in my sleep? Or embedded it in my subconscious, or something? I've tried long and hard to pull up a specific memory of it, and can't. All I know for sure is that I do recognize it…and that I could have sworn there was something about rainbows in there. AHAhhahhAHAHHhahahahahah! Yeah. Good thing I got a little refresher on the ACTUAL summoning instructions. Rainbows, my cheeks! As if!!

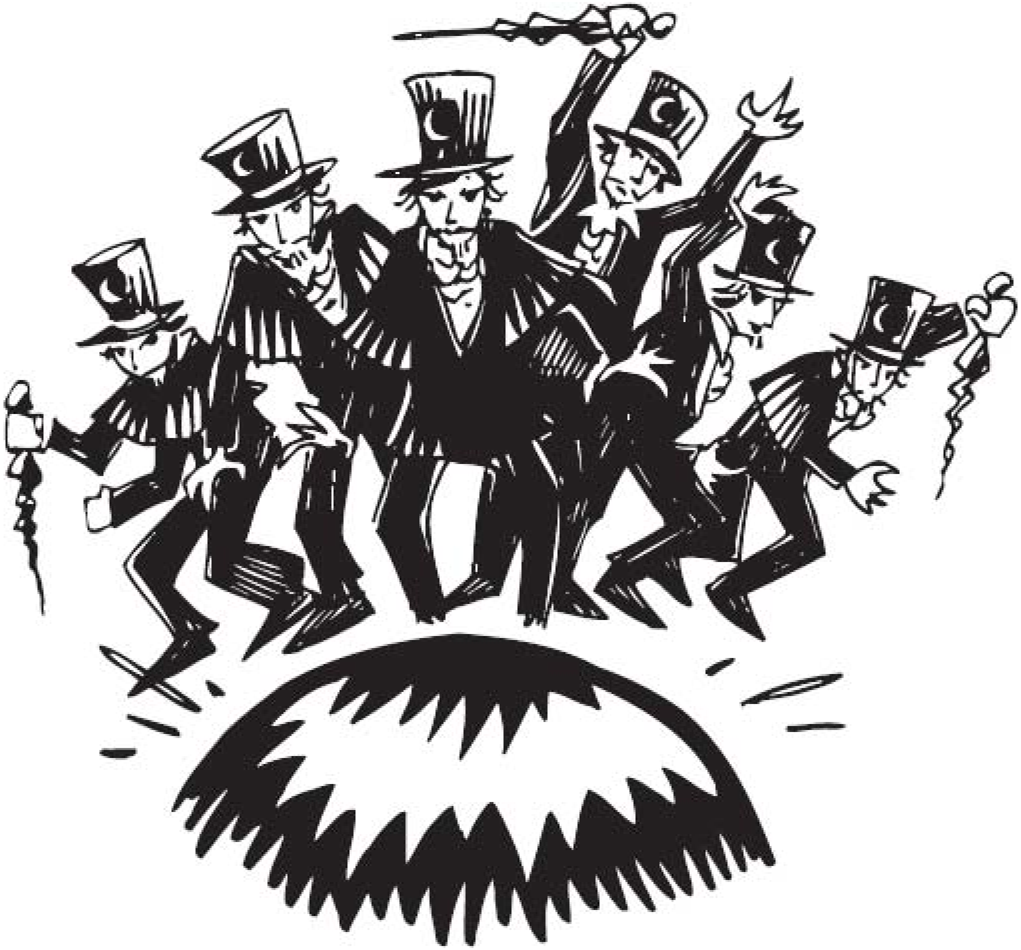
Anyway, I still need to figure out what these instructions mean, and how to follow them. But I am feeling MUCH better about things now that I've read this. There is no way Attikol has summoned black rock! He may be longer of limb than I am, but "pure of heart" and "free from sin" really can't describe a guy whose interests include recreational kneecapping.

Sun is coming up. Am real pooped. Have not fully recovered from tonight's thought-theft. Gotta get some sleep.

May 17

Those with the greatest awareness have the greatest nightmares.
—Mahatma Gandhi

Woke from horrifying nightmares—and not delightfully horrifying, either, but appalling and disturbing. Dreamed that Attikol used my wondrous DuplicatoDevice to make thousands of copies of himself. UGH! Then dreamed that I tried to use Dottie's notes to make a new Time-Out Machine so I could go back and prevent all that from happening, but didn't know how to get it working. Am now really banking on Dottie's notes being very complete. Fingers crossed that my precious inventions are not lost for eternity!



An army of Attikols.
AIIIIIIEEEEE!

Have to leave now to meet Schneider for dinner. More later.

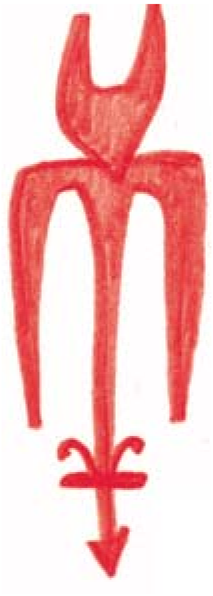
Later-back at the kiosk

VAXTERCLOBBING DRAVVBLOTS…
Dottie has duped me!!!!!!!!!
Here’s how I found out:

Me
So hey—I learned how to summon black rock!

Schneider
[Glancing around as if expecting to find himself suddenly waist-deep in the stuff.]
That's great! So…you have it, then?

Me
Well, I just got the instructions. I haven't actually decoded them yet. But at least I'm not too worried about Attikol beating me to it. I mean, if he figures out what a "six days' moon" is before I do, I'll eat my dress!



S.
[Choking on his iced tea.]
A "six days' moon"? As in "Stand under a six days' moon / And trace the ancient rainbow rune"?

Me
"The ancient SUMMONING rune"—yeah. Uh, where did you hear that?

S.

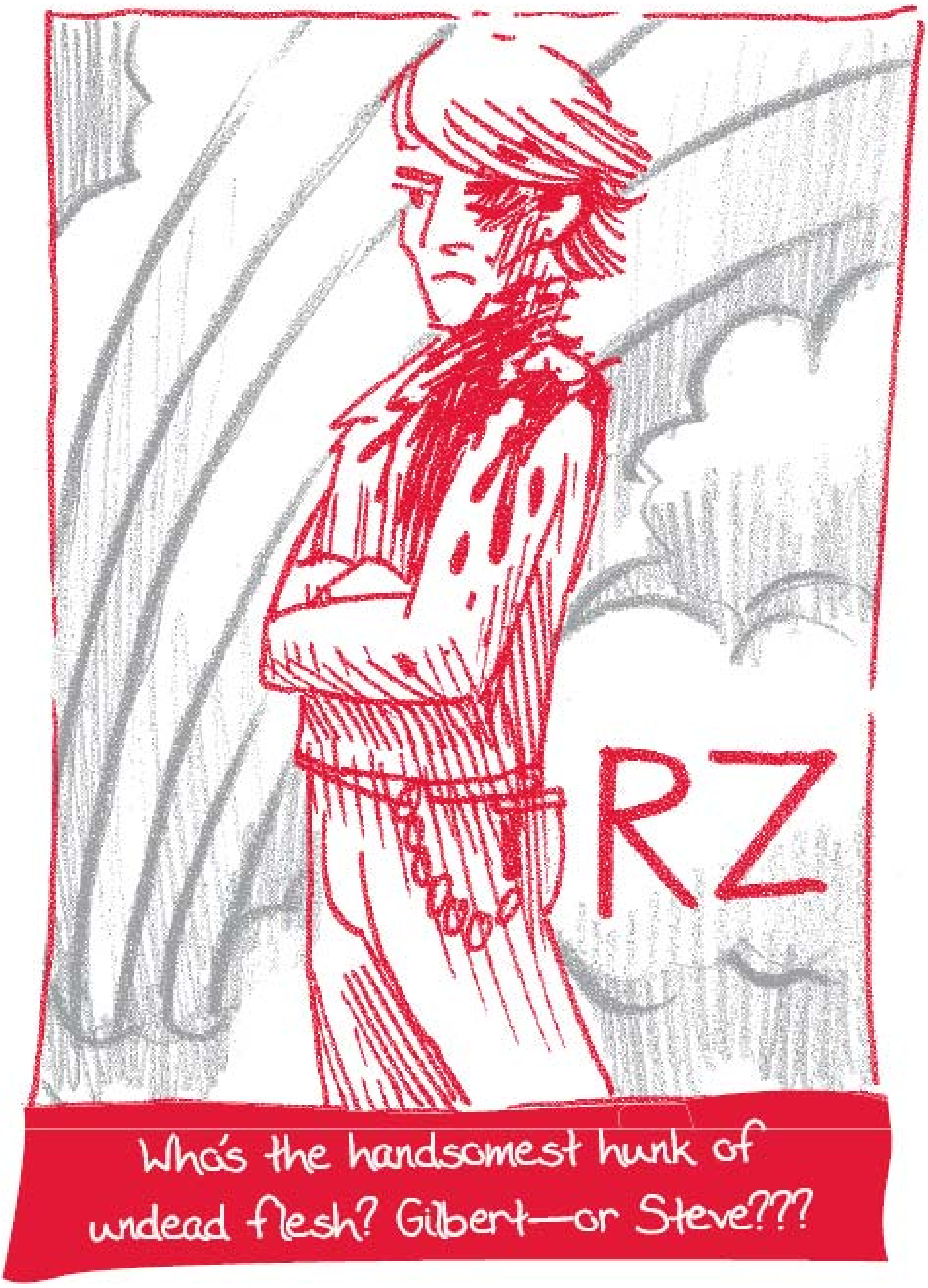
On TV, on the interweb, in line for a movie, and at dinner with my twelve-year-old niece.

Me
WHAT IN CRAZELBURG ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

It took a while for me to get all the sordid details out of Schneider. Mostly because he was laughing so hard. Will just sum up the important points: For starters, Schneider understands why I don’t watch TV as a general rule. But he made a good point when he said this might, on occasion, make me more vulnerable to duping. Especially if the duper knew perfectly well I don’t watch TV. As it turns out, the rhyme Dottie gave me comes not from the Dark Aunts but from a WILDLY popular show called…oh my frog…Rainbow Zombies. Which features incredibly good-looking teen actors as…yes…rainbow zombies. Posters of whom, I now recall, are plastered all over Dottie’s room. The nerve! Taking a perfectly respectable preternatural creature and making it A) good-looking, and B) RAINBOW-COLORED…………GAHHHH! The original rhyme (“And trace the ancient rainbow rune / Then zombie love shall be yours soon”) was, more than likely, buried in my subconscious during all those semi-brain-dead hours of television I watched in the past few days as I suffered the after-effects of the dastardly thought-ripping. Unfortunately, and ironically, my quasi-familiarity with said rhyme only made me MORE willing to accept it as authentic.

Though I REALLY should have questioned the quality of its poetry. Looking back, it’s hard to believe I actually thought a Dark Aunt could have written it!—A fact that Schneider was far too tactful to point out.

In any case, this has been an important lesson on Dottie’s wiliness. I will not underestimate her in our next encounter!


RZ
Who's the handsomest hunk of undead flesh? Gilbert—or Steve???

When Schneider and I had finally settled the point that I still do NOT know how to summon black rock, we moved on to the next piece of business: the large box he'd brought along, which held the library's complete collection of documents on Attikol's family. We started sifting through it, piece by piece, looking for anything pertaining to black rock. Nothing so far. It was mostly birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, family portraits, land deeds, that kind of thing. We kept at it for about an hour, and then the dust started making Schneider sneeze, so we agreed to put the research on hold until tomorrow.

Later-back at the kiosk again

OK, so Round One goes to Dottie…I wonder how I'm going to get the real instructions from her? It would be nice if I knew the details of her arrangement with Attikol. Is she supposed to give him the information at a preset time? Or when he asks her for it? Is there some kind of code word? If I knew this stuff, I could try disguising my voice as his and just call her up. Will keep pondering a plan…

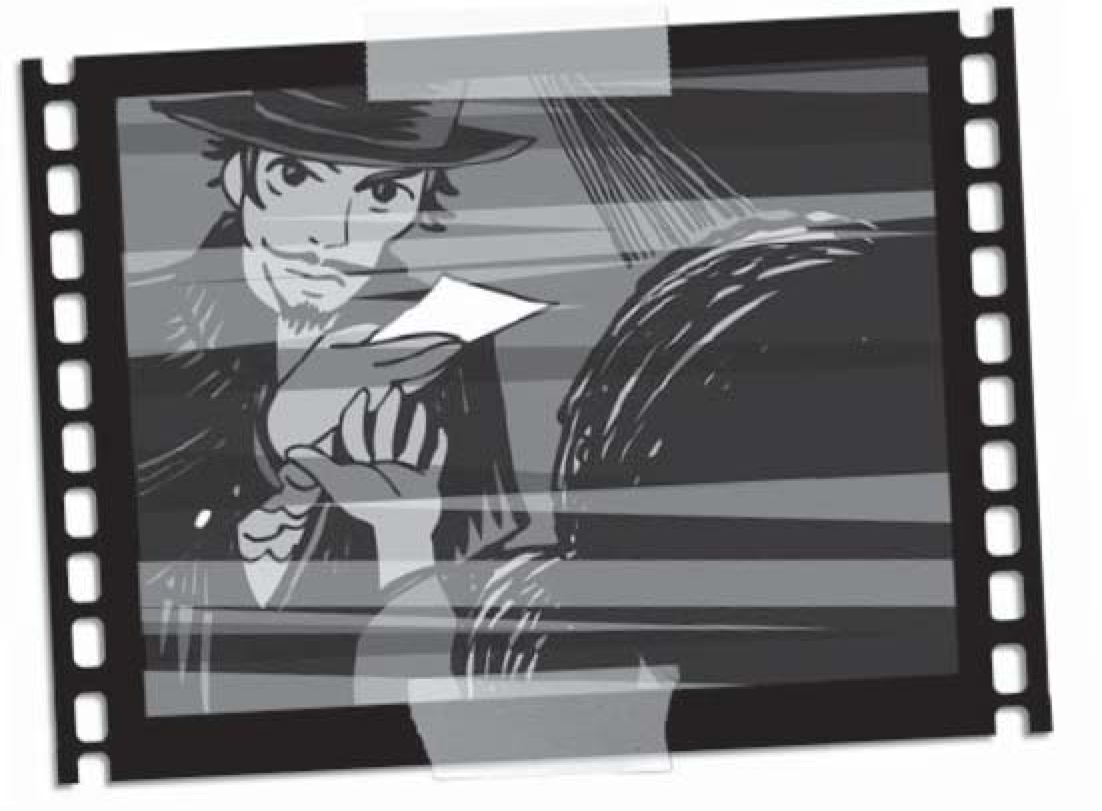
Later

Have been reading Dottie's notes on my inventions. They SEEM very thorough. Based on the Rainbow Zombies debacle, though, I am now questioning whether these notes are accurate OR complete. Sadly, A) I really have no way of knowing how much or how little of what she took is here in the notes, and B) eating her brain isn't guaranteed to get me back my complete thoughts.

Am feeling the need to know all I can about this Dottie Ebenezer girl. Am going to delve into the TranscriptoFeeds for a while and see what I can learn.

Later

Have just found video of a very upsetting conversation! WHY didn't I consider the possibility that Dottie could simply rewrite the notes I took from her? Because that is exactly what she's done.



Attikol

And there's the first half of your reward. You'll see the rest once my engineers have built the devices. Many thanks…you succeeded where an entire police force failed!

Dottie
You better appreciate it. My arm is freakin' tired after all this writing. Sixty-seven pages, and I had to do them twice!

A.
Why twice?

D.
Oh, uh, my…dog…ate the first set.

A.
Well, there's still room for more compensation.

D.
What do you want next? Another one of her crazy devices?

A.
No, I want Emily Strange herself! In a cage, that is. We both know her potential for frustrating my plans. The girl must be neutralized!

Yes. And now Attikol knows I'm in town.

GLABBERGRAKKUS!!!!!

Hmm. So what's my next step, I wonder? Find the engineers and steal the blueprints from them? Will have to substitute dummy notes, or they'll just get Dottie to write them out again. (Which would be amusing in and of itself, though not really useful to me.) Should also set up surveillance on said engineers so I can monitor their progress with the dummy notes. Some serious sabotage is probably also called for. Whatever it takes!! Cannot allow them to build my devices!

Am not SUPER concerned about Attikol's intentions to "neutralize" me…but am glad to know about them. Will proceed with proper caution!

Am running over to the medicine show to check in with Jakey. He should be able to tell me where the engineers are. Will write more later.

Later

Jakey was very relieved to see me. He has been anxious to inform me that the engineers arrived yesterday and set up headquarters in Great-Aunt Lily’s house. Oh, the travesty!!! They had better not change a thing!!!

He also felt very sorry about the thought-theft and kept apologizing for not being able to warn me in time.

Me
There was nothing you could do. But I do need your help on something else. Can you search Dottie’s mind for her plans with Attikol? I mean, when is she supposed to give him back the instructions for summoning black rock?

Jakey
I’ll have to look next time she’s in range. Sorry, until I know someone pretty well, they have to be kind of near for me to get a reading.

Me
That’s cool. Did you see anything interesting last time she visited the medicine show?

J.
It’s so hard for me to tell what might help you! She doesn’t like Attikol—but you could guess that already.

Me
It’s kind of a given. What about her mother? You said they don’t get along?

J.

Not at all. Mayor Vivi wants Dottie to be, like, president or something… and Dottie just wants to rebel.

Me
K, that's kind of intriguing.

J.
Yeah? There's all this stuff in Dottie's mind about the legacy of the Bright Girls, and how she feels like she's expected to use her special talent for the public good of Seasidetown.

Me
Oh yes—the Bright Girls! So she knows about Sweetie-Pie and her unusual talents?

J.
Yeah. And she doesn't want to be part of that whole thing. Y'know, politics, civic pride, public service, all that stuff.

Me
What DOES she want?

J.
Um, it seems like she wants money, mostly. So she can go to film school. Can you use that?

Me
Dunno. Gotta think it over. Have you tried getting at the stolen stuff again?

J.
I worked on her as much as I could that night, but the only thoughts I can see in there are her own.

Me
Any ideas why?

J.
Maybe it’s a mental block? Y’know, like that hypnotic barrier you have in your mind, to keep me out of your private stuff.

Me
Wish it worked against Dottie. Yeah, it could be something like that.

J.
Or maybe she’s essentially inanimate, like Raven.

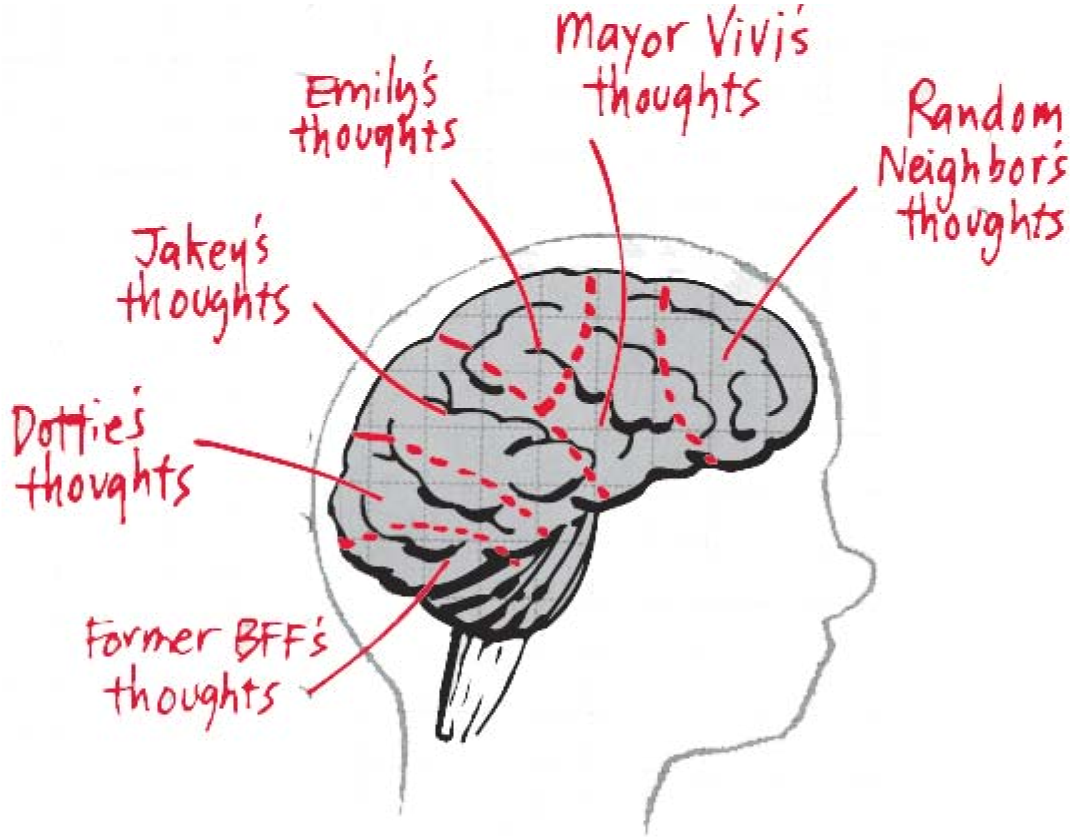
Me
[Snorting.]
Or maybe every time you DO get the thoughts back from her, she steals them again.

J.
Ugh.

Me
What do YOU think it is?

J.
I think it’s just something I haven’t learned how to do very well. I mean, reading two different people’s thoughts in one mind. And in Dottie’s case, it’s gotta be way more than just two people’s thoughts.

Me
I see what you mean.


Emily's thoughts
Mayor Vivi's thoughts
Random Neighbor's thoughts
Jakey's thoughts
Dottie's thoughts
Former BFF's thoughts

J.
Or…maybe she just doesn't have our thoughts anymore.

Me
[Long pause.]
[Some shuddering.]
Don't say that, man. She has them. She has to.

Later-back at the kiosk AGAIN, again

Ran into Ümlaut as I was leaving the medicine show and took the opportunity to congratulate him on his new act. Was still in disguise, of course. I know he dislikes Attikol as much as the next person, but I'm not taking any unnecessary risks!!!

Me

So, I’ve been wanting to ask, after seeing your fire/sword/snake show night after night: Is it possible you have some magical talent?

Ümlaut
…Wow, you just came right out and asked, didn’t you?

Me
I’d be interested to know.

Ü.
Well, I’m flattered, but no. I’m just really, really good at following instructions.

Me
[Pondering this.]
It’s funny, because I would totally believe a super-human talent related to fire, swords, and snakes. But instructions?

Ü.
[Helpfully.]
See, when Attikol told me I had to put on a fire-walking/sword-swallowing/snake-handling show, I just read the ancient masters’ instructions on how their illusions were accomplished. That’s really all there was to it.

Me
And just hours later, you were able to duplicate illusions that took them lifetimes to perfect. Nothing unusual about that!

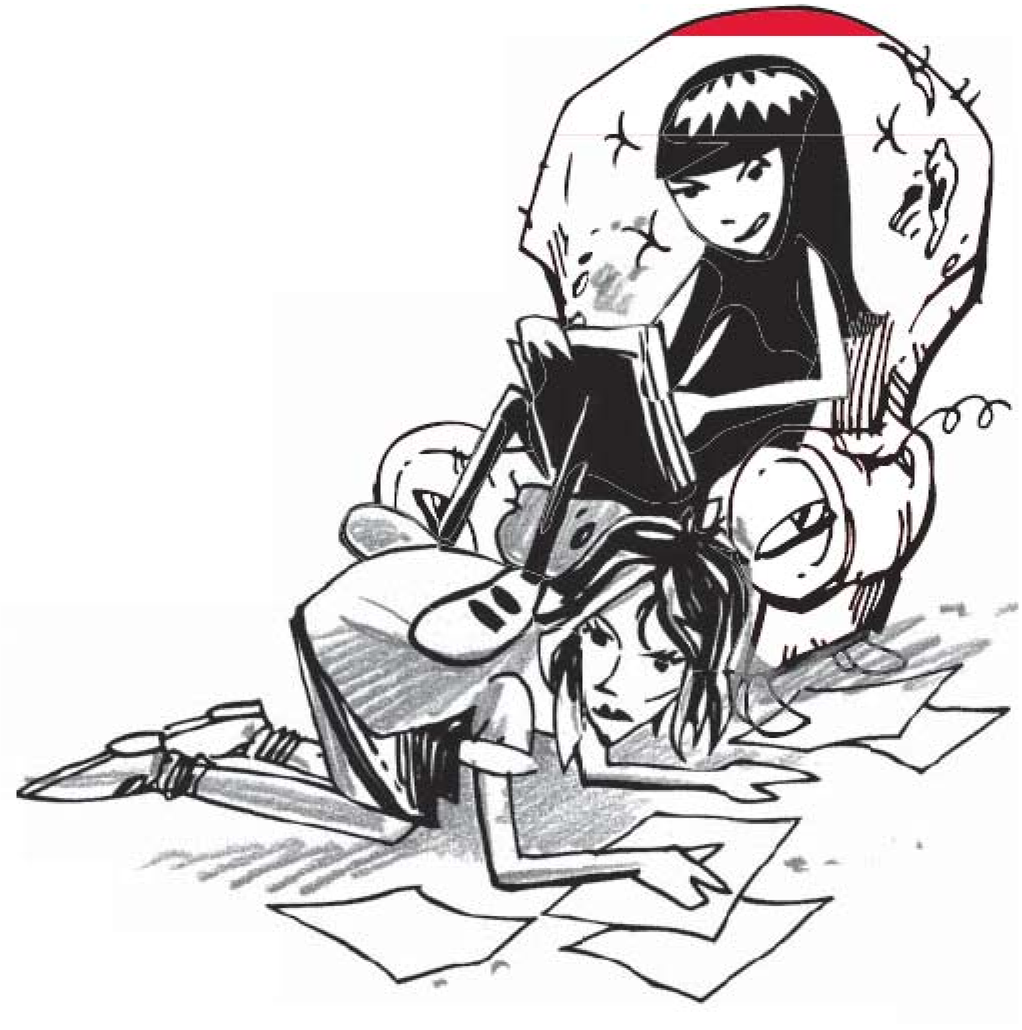
Ü.
[Modestly.]
Well, I appreciate the compliment.

Later

Have been working my arm off, writing up dummy blueprints for the engineers. Am forcing Raven to be my footstool. The kiosk is fabulously well stocked on future-garbage…not so much on footstools.

Later

OK—have finished the dummy plans. Gotta run over to Aunt Lily's house before the sun comes up.



Later

YESSSSSSSSSSS! I have the real blueprints in hand! The theft (wait—is it really theft if the goods were mine to begin with? OK—retheft) went down as smoothly as can be. Someone had put a lock on the front door, but all that meant was that I had more fun breaking in. It was a bit tougher than your average store-bought padlock, though still quite pickable for a girl with an A+ in Locksport 445.

The plans were not even secured—they were sitting out in plain sight on the recycle bin! What sloppiness. And yet the engineers have cleaned Aunt Lily's house. Drat them for dusting! What a bunch of babies. You think **I** would ever accomplish anything if **I** insisted on a dust-free lab? Sheesh.

Will also add that I took the opportunity to install three TranscriptoSpies in key locations around the lab so I can continue to monitor Attikol and engineers. Am looking forward to viewing video of the team as they start trying to build from the dummy blueprints. AHhahaHah!

Almost daylight. Going to bed.

May 18

Creating is the essence of life.
—Julius Caesar

Morning—I should be asleep, but I set an early alarm. I want to watch the engineers start work so I can savor my revenge. HahhahhHAhhHAHHah! Will write more later when I have details.

Later

NOOOOOOOOOOOOO! They STILL have the real blueprints! There has been no revenge!!! When the team arrived at the lab, they all ignored my carefully crafted dummy plans instead of using them to build an elaborate paper airplane and a matchstick urinal. At first I thought they were just dilly-dallying over personal email or something…but then one of them, in the midst of a cleaning spasm, picked up the dummy plans off the recycling bin—and stuffed them inside. That's when I realized the original plans had already been scanned, and every engineer on the team now has a full soft copy.

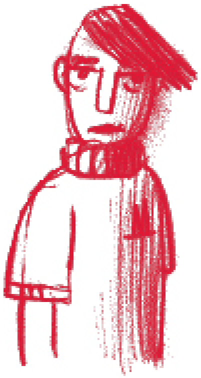
Multiple soft copies, and no telling what sort of backups.

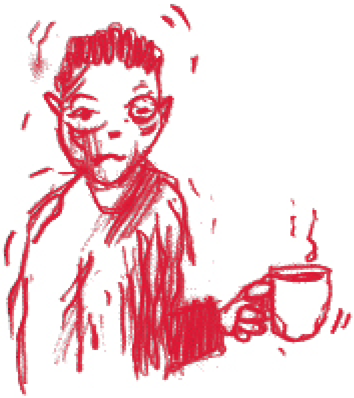
GAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

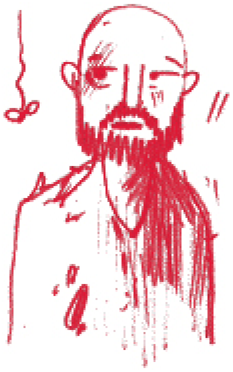
Will deal with this after I've had some more sleep.

Later-evening at last

Woke up and started reviewing tapes from the TranscriptoSpies planted around the lab in hopes of learning something of use. Here's what I've observed:

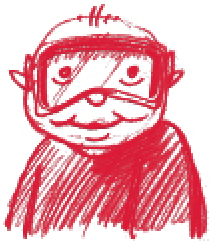


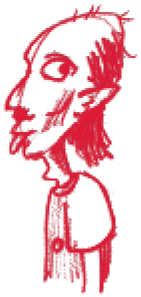


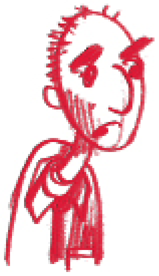


1. The team consists of six guys. Yes, guys. That's so Attikol—he probably doesn't even realize female engineers exist.
2. Have nicknamed them all. E.g., BrownTown—this one was easiest. Everything about him is brown.
3. Speedy—severe caffeine abuse problem.
4. Pigpen—filthy personal habits.
5. Dumpling—corresponding body shape and consistency.
6. Donkey—braying laugh; buck teeth; incredibly long, pointed ears; hairy tail; and hooves. (Well, the first three are true, anyway.)

7. And GubGub—for absolutely no good reason.
8. Despite the minor peculiarities noted above, they appear to be well-educated, mainstream, average adult guys.
9. Though their conversation reveals them to be way more excited by blueprints for unusual contraptions than by, say, football scores.
10. Still, they have not made much progress on actually building anything from said blueprints.
11. Instead they spend an inordinate amount of time just discussing said blueprints in glowing terms. For example: “Who ever thought of welding steel wool into a parabola? It’s sheer genius!” and “Anyone who can get liquid unnilquadium to do THAT, I’d consider something of a god.”
12. Which is probably responsible for the fact that I am feeling sorta lenient toward them and not plotting heinous revenge for the fact that they’ve usurped my great-aunt’s home. Which is really Attikol’s fault, anyway.
13. Though they are still owed mild revenge for the dusting.

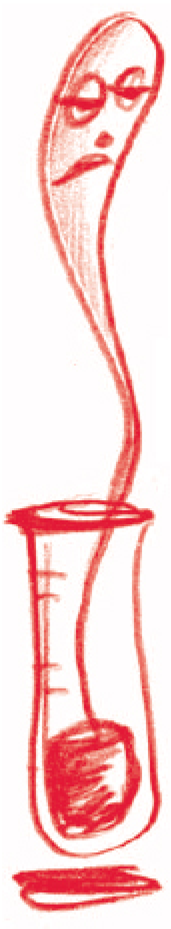






Am somewhat consoled by what I’ve seen. I guess up to now I’ve been under the impression that if an engineer, any engineer, were ever to get his/her hands on blueprints for one of my inventions, it would only be a matter of minutes before he/she had a working device assembled. I guess up to now I’ve been forgetting that the way I work is fundamentally DIFFERENT from the way most engineers do. True, we all operate within the same physical principles, but you might say I’ve got more of an open mind when it comes to materials, methods, and outcomes. I mean, who on Attikol’s team is likely to consider spiderwebs a reasonable substitute for copper wire?

Speaking of which…they’ve done their best to stock the lab properly, but I don’t really see what they are going to accomplish without a LOT more of the following:



1. Ectoplasm
2. Veggie sandwiches
3. Shlüdge™
4. Extensively cataloged collection of tidy balls of dryer lint
5. Distilled cat saliva
6. Loam
7. Cockroach colony
8. Glues of the world
9. Slime mold vivarium
10. Bottled sweats (cataloged A–Z, by organism)
11. Sun-spigot
12. Assorted spectrobollogalvanometers

13. Set of incredibly fine paintbrushes like the ones I made from my own eyelashes—the handles, I mean. The brushes themselves are molecule-thin splits of cat hair. I used a single cat hair for the entire 13-brush set!

So I guess I can relax for the moment. It is going to take these guys some time to get my devices built. Will just keep close tabs on their progress!

Later-nearly daylight

Just stopped in at the only café in Seasidetown that opens before daybreak to pick up a snack. Ran into Schneider, reading his library books and slurping espresso.

Schneider
Hey, I got through the rest of that box of stuff from Attikol's family.

Me
Anything interesting?

S.
Uh…nothing worth mentioning yet. I'm putting together a family tree, though. I thought I would try to figure out who each of the 13 Shady Uncles were.

Me
Oh. Yeah. Start stalking Attikol's family instead of mine…sounds like a great plan.

Later

Raven and I just got back to the kiosk after our visit to the mayor's mansion. Here's how that went:

Me
Nice work with the Rainbow Zombies rhyme, Dottie. You had me fooled for at least an hour.

Dottie
Hey, I'm getting PAID to keep that information safe for Attikol. You don't think I'm just gonna hand it over?

Me
So it's the money you're after, then?

D.
Of course it is.

Me
But Dottie, think of the big picture for a minute. Have you considered what Attikol would do with black rock, and with my special inventions, if he actually got them?

D.
That's not my concern. I'm getting paid to do a job, and I intend to do it.

Me
So you won't do the right thing and stand up to minor evil?

D.
Nope. Not if minor evil is paying.

Me
I feel you. Your mom’s cramming this whole civic pride thing down your throat. The Bright Girl legacy! Seasidetown Über Alles! Blah, blah, blah.

D.
[Eyes narrowing.]
So you have some insight into my conflict with my mom. So what? You’re still not getting the summoning instructions.

Me
Well then, would you be open to a little double-dealing? Take Attikol’s money, but help me instead?

D.
[Shrugging.]
I’ll take on new clients, as long as they can pay my fee. But I made an agreement with Attikol to give those instructions only to him.

Me
So nothing I could pay you would be enough to break your agreement?

D.
NOW you’re catching on.

SIGH.

Later

Roamed aimlessly around Seasidetown for an hour or so and found myself drifting toward Great-Aunt Lily’s house. Thought it would be nice to sneak in and get some snuggles with Mystery. Found a new and even more difficult lock on the door. I was still able to spring it open in less than a minute, but only because I happen to have read up on disc-detainer locks just last month.

Also wanted to make sure my TranscriptoSpies weren't missing anything critical, like a half-finished Time-Out Machine or something. HahaAHHah-hAha! On the contrary. The lab is a bit of a disaster zone—and not MY kind of disaster zone, full of frenzied and successful creativity. No, it was the chaos that speaks of frustration and failure. Was very cheered by this!!!

While I was there, I REALLY considered taking the opportunity to wreak some sabotage, but reflected that the poor engineers (who are already struggling with my impossible blueprints, and who have kind of endeared themselves to me in the process) would be the ones suffering the consequences. And it's not like they are anywhere close to actually building my devices. Added to which, it goes against all I believe in to sabotage a lab, any lab. So I held myself in check. Attikol WILL get his come-uppance!!!!!!

However—I did seize the moment by leaving them the following note:

Dudes—

Too bad you guys are having so much trouble building my Time-Out Machine and DuplicatoDevice. Wish I could help, but that is impossible, seeing as Attikol is my ancestral enemy. Also thought you should know that he stole those blueprints out of my brain. If you guys found it in your souls to thwart him a little, I could probably kick down some homemade sesquipelithium as a token of my thanks.

Later—
“The inventor”

OK. Heading back to the kiosk now. Time for bed.

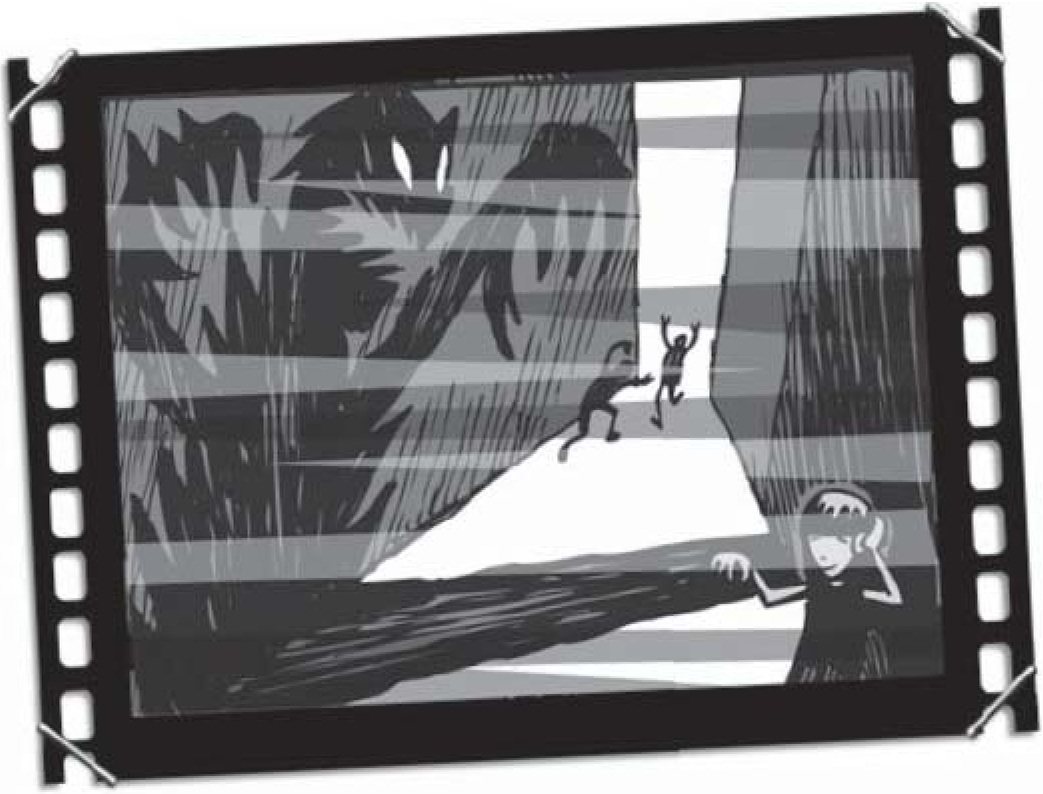
May 19

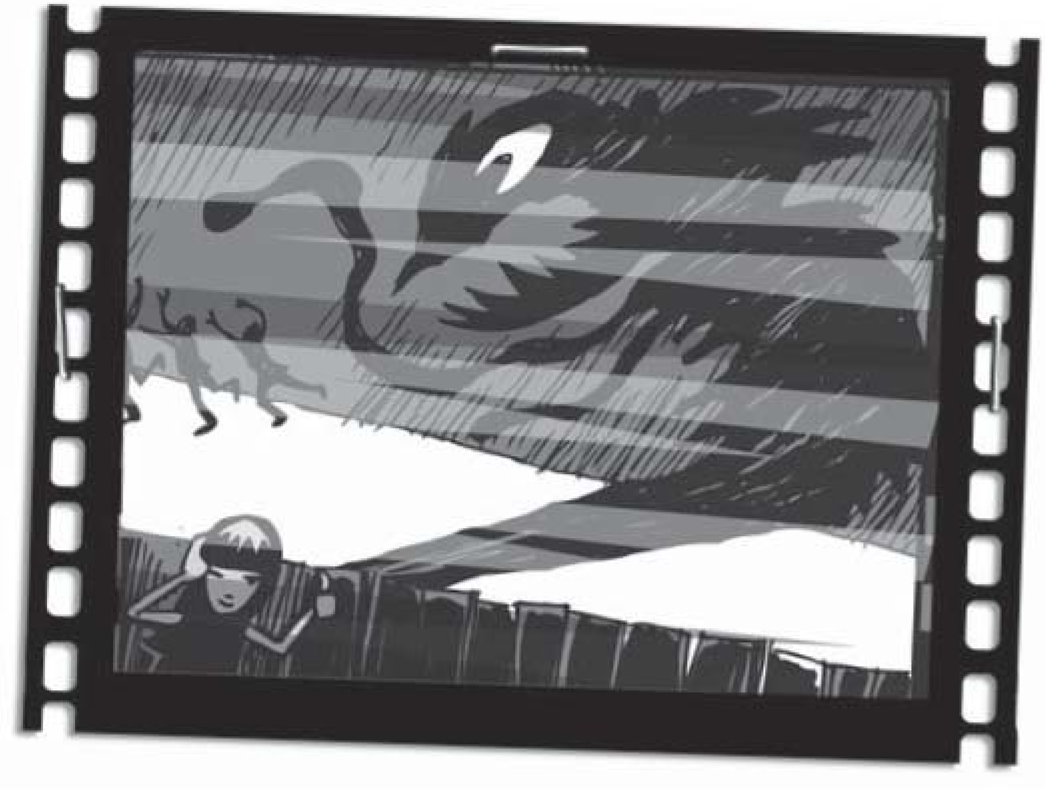
I was raised to question authority.
—Ian MacKaye

Woke up this evening feeling like I have accomplished NOTHING in Seasidetown. Haven’t invoked my inheritance, carved my initials into a chair in the Boardroom, or made any mischief worth speaking of. Decided it would make me feel worlds better and help clear my mind if I at least embarked on a little making of mischief.

So I hit the town, ThoughtCorder in hand. Had a very pleasant time using it to project scenes of attacking monsters and scare the pants off some late-night pedestrians.

Here are some choice stills documenting the madness that ensued:





Oh man, that felt good! I needed some belly-busting laughs at other people’s expense to lift my mood.

OK…time to pack in the tomfoolery for tonight. Am meeting Schneider at the café in ten.

Later

Schneider brought some VERY interesting information to tonight’s meeting! Here’s how our conversation went:

Schneider
Did your great-aunt Emma ever mention old family diaries?

Me
No, not specifically.

S.
Well, remember, I said I came to Seasidetown because Lily lived here. But there was another reason. I’d seen a reference to this town in Emma’s things. I never told you the whole story…or why I applied for the Head Librarian job.

Me
Well? Spill.

S.
The reference was in an old date book that I found in the Blackrock house. On September 23, 1977, Emma visited Seasidetown. The entry says, "Head Librarian 8 p.m. Re: Great-Aunt diaries.”

Me
[Choking on my own saliva.]
WHAT? DIARIES? Where are they?? Gimme gimme gimme!!!!

S.

Well, let me finish. I didn't want to mention it until I actually found them. But at this point, I've searched the whole place. I've scoured the microfiche, been through the whole card catalog, AND visited the former Head Librarian.

Me
And, what, no diaries?

S.
[Squinting in disappointment.]
Sorry, Em. I REALLY wanted to find them for you.

Me
No leads at all? No hunches? Nothing?

S.
There IS a lead…IF you are OK with basing far-fetched theories on what might be the babblings of a madwoman.

Me
Flabberfarkus! I PREFER far-fetched theories based on babblings of madwomen.

S.
Great, cuz the former Head Librarian is in her late nineties and not entirely clear in the mind. She couldn't tell me anything about your aunt Emma, or

any diaries, but in the middle of a conversation about our favorite foods and the weather, she casually asked me if I’d seen the library’s secret book vault.

Me
[Sharp intake of breath.]
K, I’ll check it out.

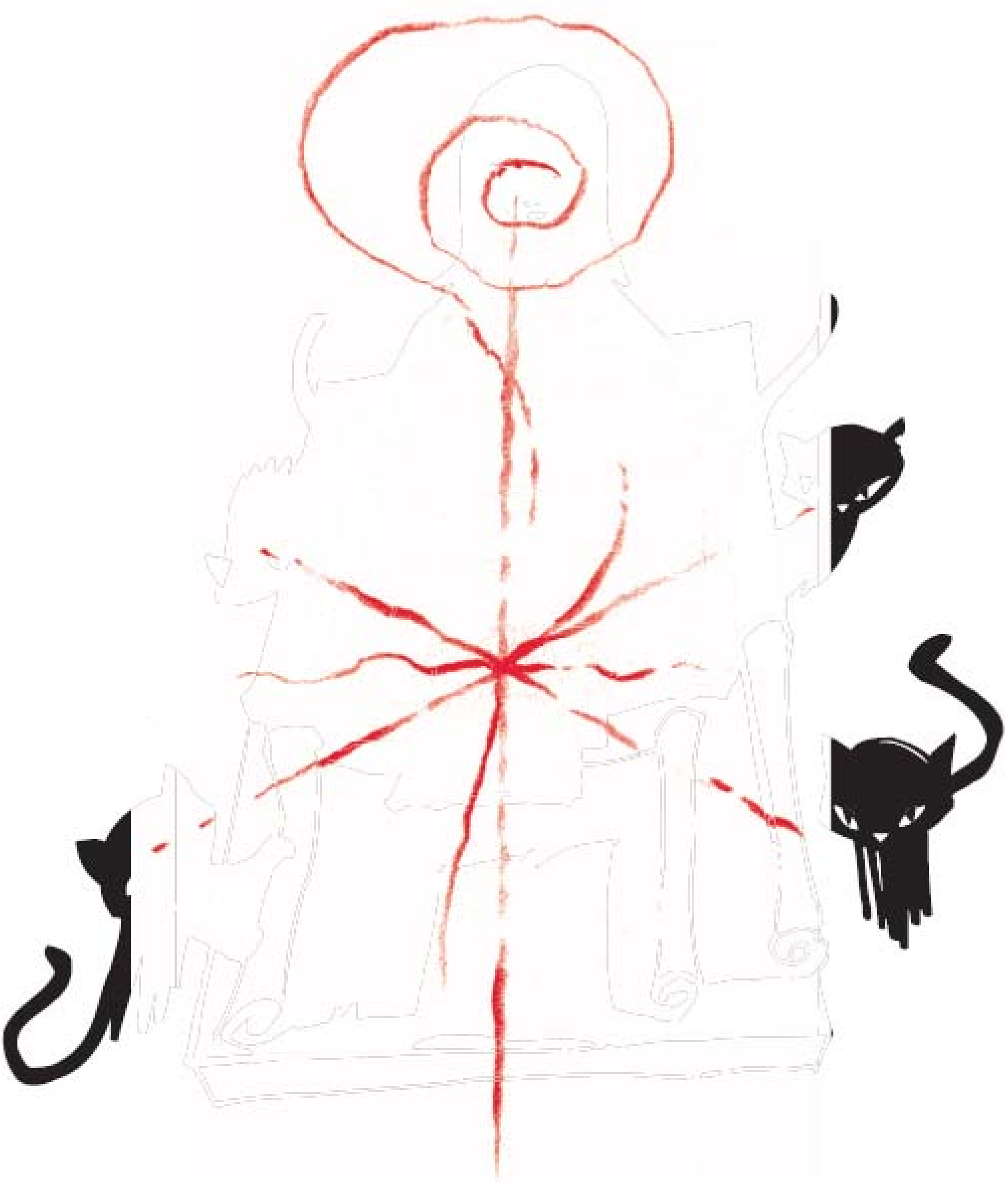
Later

Have just gotten back from the library. Yes, I snuck in during the night. Yes, I found the blueprints. Yes, I followed certain architectural discrepancies to locate a secret book vault. Unfortunately, NO, I do NOT have my hands on any Great-Aunts’ diaries.

—OK. Let me slow down and describe what happened from the beginning.

First off, Raven and cats and I trekked over to the library, and I made a quick survey of its security. SIGH. I guess it’s kind of touching how Seasidetown sees no need for better alarm systems on its public buildings and mayoral residences, but they really could use an upgrade. Should offer to consult with them on beefing up their security. Or not. No sweat off my teeth. >Snork.<

Once we were inside, I located the library’s blueprint room, picked the lock, and helped myself to the architectural diagrams of the library itself. The cats and I took over a big table so we could spread out. I told Raven to guard the door, and we hunkered down to scrutinize the blueprints.



It took a moment for all four cats to settle in and really look with me. And it was the strangest thing, maybe just a trick of my mind, but I could swear that as soon as all of us were focused on the blueprints, the shape popped right out.

The library's floor plan makes the same shape as the Dark Girls' tunnels—the way they were two hundred years ago!

Of course, I lost no time in locating and letting myself into the secret book vault. It wasn't even that difficult, once I knew where to look—specifically, right behind the shelf containing Dewey Decimal Class 090—Manuscripts and Rare Books, of course!

Actually, it might have been tougher if I hadn't recently completed a full semester of Strange 101. Luckily, Aunt Millie's lessons included a healthy dose of Dark Girl Skills (she knows how to keep things interesting for me)—and that meant a solid introduction to Secret Room Concealment and Detection!

Which is why I was able to locate the hidden door release (use your fingers, silly, not your eyes—a Dark Girl knows how to make things nearly invisible), activate it (with a two-step hairpin jiggle), and disarm the inevitable booby trap (a complete edition of the Oxford English Dictionary that otherwise would have slammed into my shins with all the force of a runaway train).

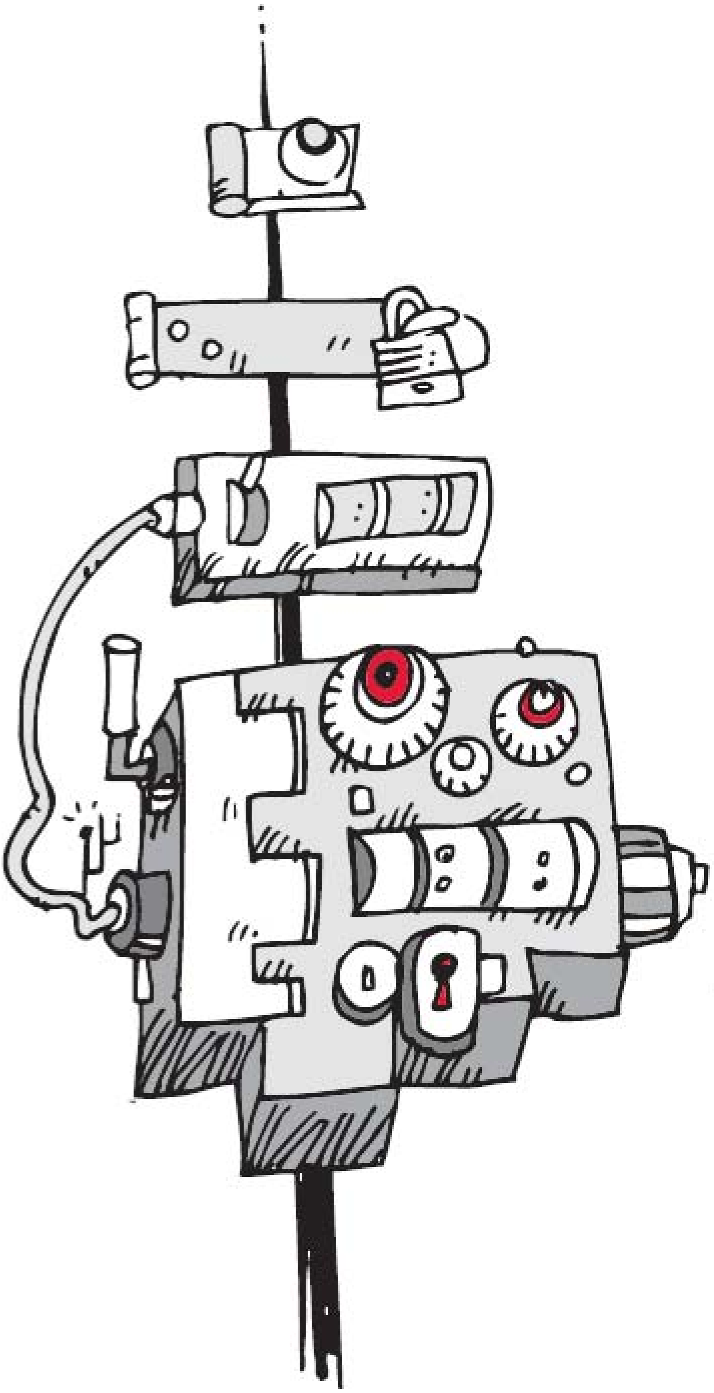
Unfortunately the secret book vault contained not a single secret book! And not a single nonsecret book, either. It was completely empty, with no sign that anything had ever been there.

Am feeling majorly cheated on the whole secret book vault front.

Later

Although it was very late and I kind of knew Schneider would be in bed, I had to call him as I left the library to tell him about my adventure there. He was super excited about the vault…and super let down to hear it was empty.

Yeah. Pretty disappointing. Aunt Emma said she had hoped one of the elder aunts had left some kind of instructions for me. Those diaries might have been it! Well, I'm not done looking. There's still Aunt Lily's house to be searched!



Later

Cats and Raven and I ended up going straight to Aunt Lily’s house from the library to do some searching. There was a MUCH trickier lock on the front door: a dimple lock with more telescoping pins than I’ve ever seen. Couldn’t get my pick gun to work for the life of me, so I tried key bumping. Took me quite a while, and made me sweat something fierce, but I eventually got the flathering thing open. All of which points to the question: Where are these locks coming from? I mean, this last one was clearly a custom job by a really skilled lockcrafter.

Had to laugh at myself as I was working on it, because from a practical standpoint, it would've been far easier for me to go in through a window. But that's not what locksport is about. The thrill I get as a tough lock falls open…man, I love that rush!

Am looking forward to tomorrow's lock!

OK. I think I am finally done geeking out on the fun lock challenge. Ready to get down to business searching this place for those diaries. Luckily I have a full semester of Strange Family 101 under my belt! Great-Aunt Millie gave me a solid basic training in Diary Concealment. And my cats are no slackers when it comes to sniffing out hiding places. If the diaries are here, we will find them!

Later

OH MY FRABWAX

We found them we found them we found them

—Not diaries, but INSTRUCTIONS!!!!!!

Here's how we did it:

First we went over each room verrrrry slowly, thumping the walls and floors, looking for loose nails and false moldings, measuring the walls to see if they were wider than they should be, examining all the furniture carefully with pocket X-ray…absolutely nothing was turning up, and the cats were getting sneezy from the dust, and I was ready to give it up and go back to the kiosk for a rest…

And then something funny happened to Raven's eyes.

I've seen it happen twice now. Once in the town of Blackrock, and once in my own attic during my final class of Strange 101.

It was the spirit of Great-Aunt Emma animating my golem!

Great-Aunt Emma
Emily, my dear.

Me
Aunt Emma! It’s great to see you. Err, hear you.

G.A.E.
This is difficult for me…I won’t be able to stay long.

Me
OK. We’re trying to find the Great-Aunts’ diaries. Do you know where they are?

G.A.E.
[Shaking her head—Err, shaking RAVEN’S head.]
Emily, take a good look at the painting hanging in Lily’s bedroom.

Me
The one of the tall black rock? I already took it down, X-rayed it, and inspected the wall it was hanging on…there’s nothing there.

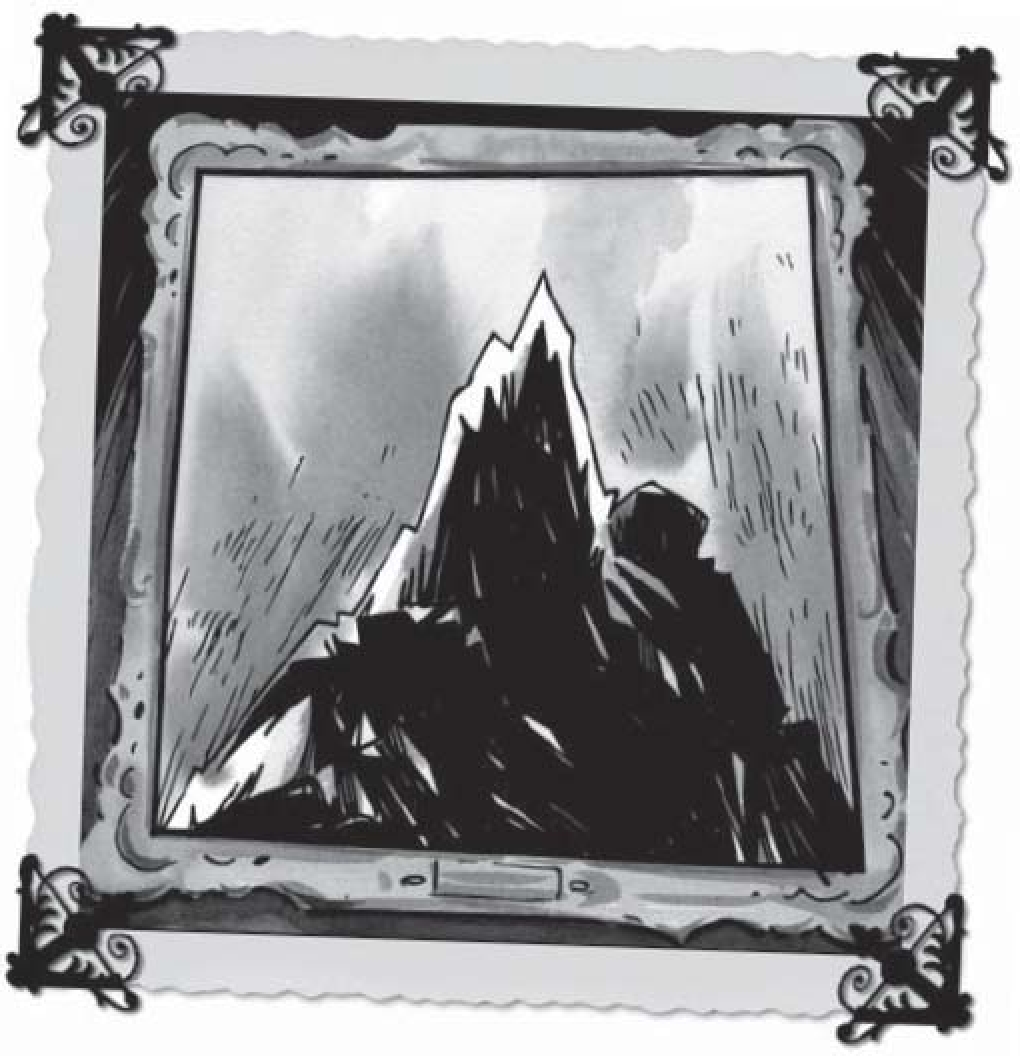
G.A.E.
Great-Aunt Amelia painted it. It was the only painting she ever made that wasn’t a portrait. That has never made sense to me.

Me
Well, I can look at it again, but I really don’t think there are any diaries hidden in it, if that’s what you’re saying.

G.A.E.
[Shaking her head again.]
Look behind the paint, Emily…look behind the paint…

And she was gone, and it was just dull, familiar Raven again, staring blankly at me.

I went back to Aunt Lily’s bedroom and took another look at the painting of the tall black rock.

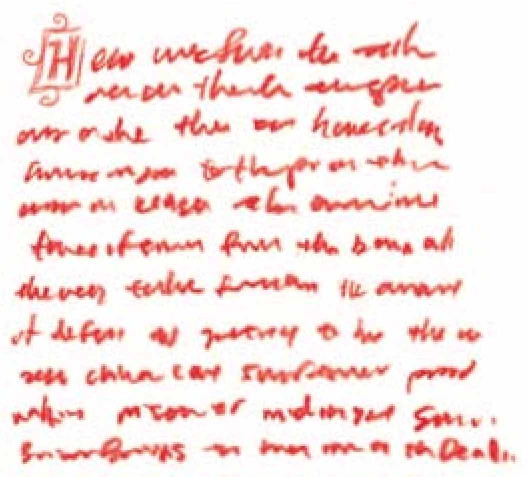


Knowing Great-Aunt Amelia had painted it made me see it in a whole new light. Like Aunt Emma had pointed out, this would have been her only landscape, the only thing she ever painted that wasn't a portrait. That in itself was a bit odd, but another thing was standing out even more clearly to me, and maybe that's because I've done so much painting myself: The technique was totally different in this painting. I've seen a few dozen of the paintings Aunt Amelia made, and I never would have recognized this as one of hers. Her normal method was to blend liquid black rock with pigments, then use the mixture to paint portraits that had a very special quality: Under bright moonlight, and held at just the right angle, her portraits revealed their subjects' future.

The paint in this landscape was completely different. It didn't have that unusual "mixed-with-black-rock" look at all. No, it seemed like ordinary oil paint.

Paint that I was going to try to look behind.

So I zipped downstairs to Attikol’s engineers’ lab. Armed with solvents and rags, I returned to the painting. And 13 minutes later, this is what I had revealed:



INSTRUCTIONS!!!!!!!!!

Written in liquid black rock!

Am going to read the instructions out loud so I can get a transcript.

Me

OK. I’m going to read the instructions out loud so I can get a transcript. [Clearing my throat.]

Here find instructions for the 13th Dark Girl. For it is she who may secure control of the black rock for the 13 Dark Girls to follow, as our honored Aunt LaRue did for us. If she succeed not, alas, alas indeed! For the 13th Shady Uncle may wrest control away! As the black rock has endowed me with the power to predict, I am shown many things which are and which may come to pass. I am shown Bright Girls, mysteriously talented. Their lineage is separate from ours, but at times our destinies meet in strange ways. In some generations they ally themselves with Shady Uncles, and in some, with Dark Girls. But always, once the pride has come upon a Bright Girl, she can be swayed by greed no longer. The pride comes to each Bright Girl differently. A Dark Girl may make a bridge for a Bright Girl from her self to her pride. Oh flammergraks, is this all about Bright Girls?

I need some black rock summoning instructions here! All right, I'll just read the rest of it. Make a bridge…yada yada…Shady Uncles have also talents mysterious, and while we are wont to consider them ancestral enemies, such is to simplify the case overmuch. Their fate is entwined with ours. It is shown to me that our lines may someday become one, and black rock shall be the source of mutual power rather than the source of strife. True, we must be wary, for many (too many!) Shady Uncles are unenlightened, moved only by greed, arrogance, and petty revenge. Know that a Shady Uncle will arise, noble and yet humble, worthy of our friendship. Therefore I tell you, Dark Girl of the future, it will serve you well to look deep into the heart of a Shady Uncle. Quell your rivalry and grant his deepest wish! Thus am I shown.

WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?

That's it?

That's my instructions?

Am feeling cheated and worse than cheated—BETRAYED! There is no way I'm granting ATTIKOL his deepest wish! I mean, if his deepest wish were for a SHINY NEW PENNY, I wouldn't grant it! I don't care what ANY Dark Aunt tells me, he IS my ancestral enemy. And I don't care if our lines are destined someday to become one; it's not happening in MY lifetime!!!!!!!

And I still do not know how to summon black rock.

OK. No time for a tantrum. I need to focus on concealing these instructions, as unhelpful as they may be, so that Attikol never sees them. Luckily I always travel with a full set of brushes and paints in my pockets…

SHINY NEW
PENNY!

Later

Went back to the kiosk, feeling kinda morose, and spent some time looking through the TranscriptoFeeds. I was wondering if, despite everything I THINK I know about Attikol, he might actually be harboring a noble and humble heart under that swaggering, abrasive exterior. But, really, I think not. Here's a small piece of evidence from earlier today:

Attikol
Well, nerds? How's the work? Do you have my devices built yet?

BrownTown
Not exactly. No.

A.
And what's your excuse today?

B.T.
Ummm…You haven't gotten us the ruthenium we asked for? To actually build either of these devices, we'd first need to build a spectrobollogalvanometer? We don't know HOW to build a spectrobollogalvanometer, or whatever that is? Oh, and we're not MAGIC?

A.
[Laughing gently.]
Here’s where I’m probably supposed to tell you my inspirational backstory in order to encourage your renewed efforts and spur you on to a montage scene full of successful device-building.

B.T.
[Sighing.]
Well? We’re listening.

A.
[Snapping his fingers at his thugs.]
Ivac? Sharpie? Kindly tell the team here my inspirational backstory, would you? If you know what I mean. Remember, no injuries to the hands—they’ll need those…

[CENSORED—BRIEF EPISODE OF PETTY VICIOUSNESS]

B.T.
[Between yelps and groans.] Let me guess—you don’t actually have an inspirational backstory, do you?

A.
[Cackling maniacally.]
Nope!

Later

Another thing from Aunt Amelia’s instructions is bugging me—that whole “make a bridge” part. I can see how it could be good for me if Dottie’s ancestral civic pride would kick in and make her less motivated by money. But what exactly would I do to “make the bridge” from Dottie’s self to her pride????? It sounds like way more involvement in DOTTIE and her inner workings than I care to get into. Will keep thinking on it, though, because it would really help out to have a less money-motivated Dottie on my hands.

Later

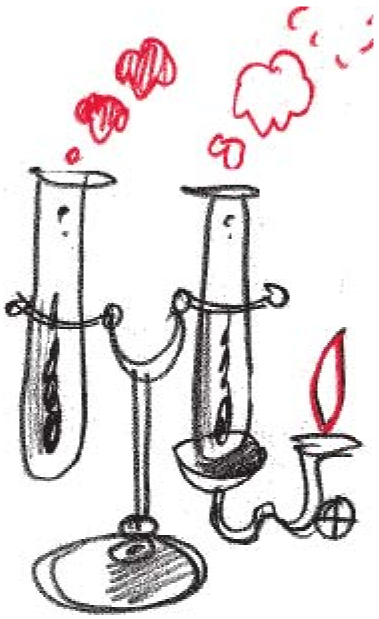
Was feeling kind of concerned for the safety of the engineers after reading the transcript above, so I spent a good bit of time scanning through the feeds from Mystery’s TranscriptoSpy and the ones I planted around the lab. There is definitely the possibility of continued violence from Attikol’s thugs if the inventions don’t get built. Not much I can do about that, though!

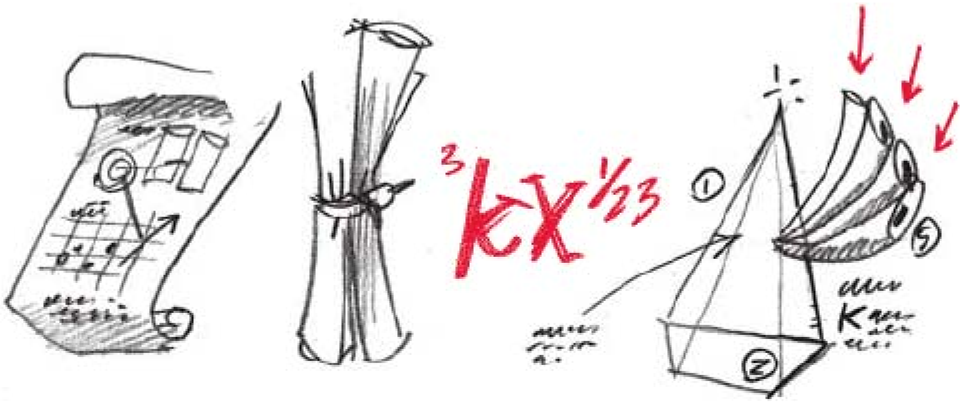
Observations:

1. The lab is starting to seem wickedly well-supplied, as deliveries of esoteric and spendy equipment arrive almost hourly.
2. However, many of the parts and materials used in my devices have been difficult to obtain—notably the magnetohydrodynamic

differentiator, the liquid-ion cyclotron, the splinting ogrometer, and oh yeah, the liquid black rock.

3. The whereabouts of which no one has the slightest clue.
4. Not to mention their complete confusion over WHAT it is.
5. Or what its function might be in a DuplicatoDevice or Time-Out Machine.
6. None of which is stopping them from at least trying to put the contraptions together with the parts they do have.
7. It’s pretty clear why—Attikol obviously wants a return on his investment, and his thugs want someone to hurt.
8. So the work creeps forward, sprinkled with lots of comments like, “Am I reading this right? Finally, a way to avoid solder embrittlement on a ceramoid pellicle?”
9. And “Bite me! Meld noneutectic alloys with my bare hands, eh? I’m not Superman!”
10. And “Did you notice how the magnetic flux through the pipe cleaner/googly-eye matrix, like, totally challenges conventional understanding of Faraday’s law? Genius!”
11. And “Who thinks of connecting a gravity grid to a motherboard with HUMAN HAIR? It’s sheer brilliance!”
12. Am starting to feel slightly uncomfortable with all the hero worship!
13. Gobcheeks—what am I saying? I need to turn said hero worship to my advantage!





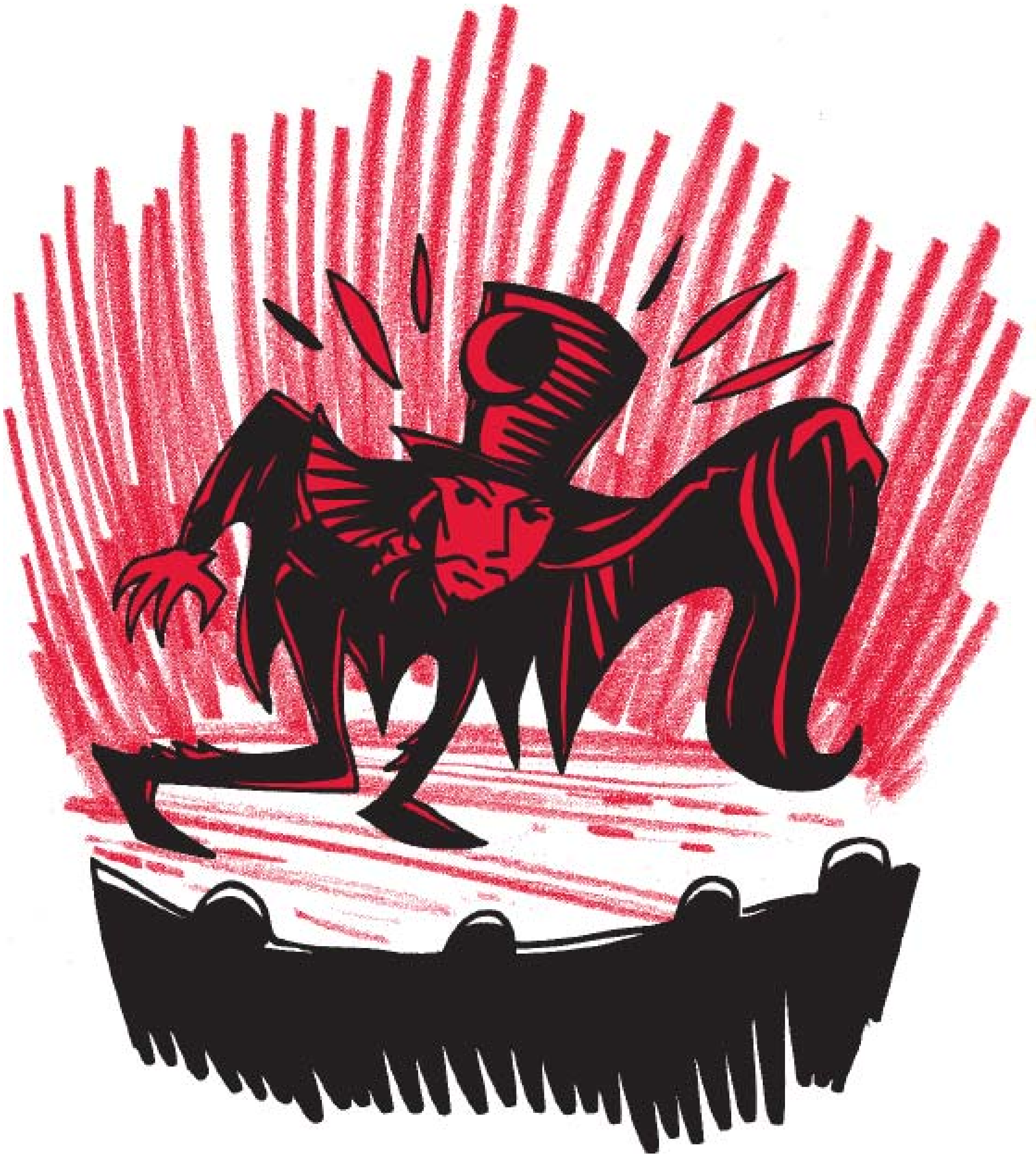
May 20

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
—Arthur C. Clarke, Profiles of the Future

Woke up, disguised myself and Raven, and headed out for my usual visit to the Caravan of Wonders. And there I had a potential brainwave! I was sitting in the audience watching Attikol's ridiculously overblown performance in the evening's grand finale. I was half-paying attention, just kind of rolling my eyes at him, and half-working on my Documentary of Inheritance. And I realized I was casting Attikol in the Evil Overlord role, even though I don't EXACTLY see him like that—I mean, he's hardly

Overlord caliber! But in a movie of our epic ancestral conflict, it’s definitely the part he would play.

Well, so that led me to imagine our dramatic final battle for the black rock, and THAT led me to visualize (with great horror) what Evil Overlord Attikol might do if he were to triumph. There’s no doubt in my mind that the dude would gloat. And in gloating, wouldn’t he reveal lots of juicy information? Possibly something I could use against him somehow?



Am thinking I might be able to use my ThoughtCorder to fool him into thinking he has found black rock. It would be so cool to trigger an informative gloat. And at the very least, I might get him off the trail for a while!

More later, when my plans are more solid. Gotta get back to the kiosk. Almost time for dinner with the Posse.

Later

THEY HAVE CATNAPPED SABBATH!!!!!!!!!!!!

When I got to the kiosk, only Mystery, Miles, and NeeChee had returned…so I started checking the cats' feeds. Oh Horrors! Took a lot of reading between the lines, but what I pieced together was this: Dottie nabbed Sabbath somewhere in or around her home, then turned him over to Attikol. Meanwhile, thugs Ivac and Sharpie had captured Miles in the hotel kitchen using the old Fish Guts Ploy. Sabbath had been taken to a location as yet unknown…but Miles had been released, with the following note tied to his collar:

To the attention of Miss Emily Strange

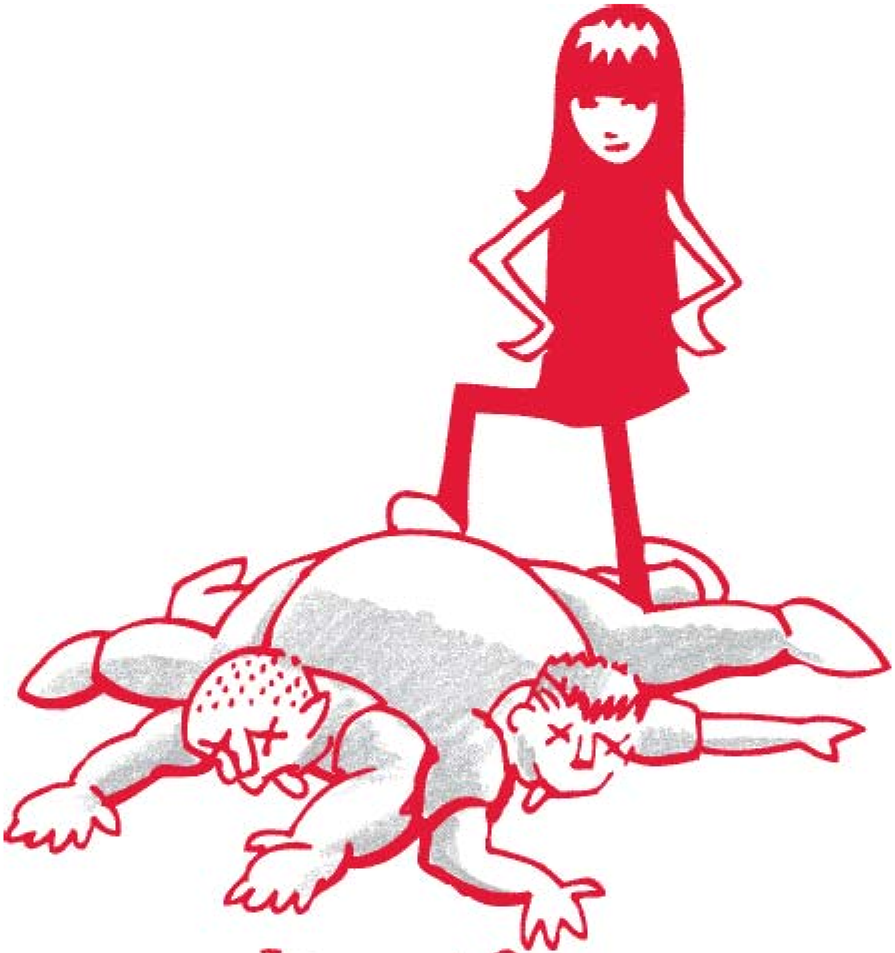
By no**w** **Y**ou ha**v**e **N**oticed that **w**e are in **poss**ession of **y**our cat “Sabbath..” If **y**ou **w**ish to SeE him again, **You will** appear at the **M**a**YO**r’s mansion ALONE, **T**onight at **11 P.M.** shar**p**. Again please note you must be **AL**oNe or we will be **f**orced to take drastic ste**p**s.

RIGHT! Like I will comply with any of that. I just wish I had more time to prepare. It’s 10:15 already. OK, must hurry, will write more later—

Later

Am hiding in a closet in the mayor’s mansion. Here’s what has happened so far:

1. Arrived at mayor’s mansion at 10:57 and sent Raven around the back.
2. Picked the lock on the front door at 11 p.m. sharp.
3. Was immediately approached by Ivac, who took my arm (quite a bit more roughly than I liked!) and pulled me into the foyer.
4. Where Sharpie was waiting, a loaded syringe in his hand.
5. With assistance of my Krav Maga training, specifically hammerfist and strategic groin kicks, I wrangled out of Ivac’s grip, snatched syringe from Sharpie, and sedated both of them. (Much to their relief, after the agony of said groin kicks.)
6. Using specially programmed summoning whistle, summoned Raven from her hideout in the back bushes.
7. The two of us then tiptoed through the house until we located Attikol and Dottie, lounging (with their respective bodyguards, of course) in the den.
8. Covertly installed TranscriptoSpy just inside the door to the den.
9. Retreated and began reconnaissance of the rest of the house.
10. Helped myself to sandwich fixings in the mayor’s very well-stocked kitchen.
11. Having been all over the house and found no sign of Sabbath, I decided he was being held in a separate location. Holed up with Raven in Dottie’s closet to monitor the TranscriptoSpy.
12. After approx. two minutes, kicked Raven out of the closet for mouth-breathing. Sent her to go wait under the bed.
13. Recorded the following conversation:



Ivac and Sharpie,
out of commission!

D.

Attikol
11:10 and no sign of Emily Strange. Are you certain your information was accurate?

Dottie
Are you certain your little psychic's information is accurate? All I can tell you is that HE thinks this Emily girl cares about her cats more than just about anything. Maybe he's wrong. I really couldn't say.

A.
Perhaps, perhaps…and maybe she's just late. While we're waiting, why don't you tell us what you learned from the cat?

D.

[Sighing.]
Well, this is a cat of little mind, I think. It only took me a couple seconds to pull everything he knew about Emily Strange and liquid black rock. Here's my notes. Now…my fee, please?

Mayor Ebenezer
[Entering the room just as Attikol pulls out his checkbook.]
Dottie! Are you using your special talents for monetary gain? I've told you time and time again, that's not the Ebenezer way.

D.
Maybe it's not YOUR way. But you said you wouldn't pay for film school, and I've got to come up with the tuition somehow.

M.E.
And how many times do I need to say that film school is not an appropriate goal for an Ebenezer? The arts are something we contribute to philanthropically…not something we throw our lives away on!

D.
Right, nothing short of the presidency for your little girl, huh? Look, I'm not interested in politics or having public buildings named after me or helping Seasidetown! You can all go fall in the ocean for all I care.

M.E.
Right! Up to your room, young lady! As for you, Attikol, I'll have to ask you to leave…and to stop paying my daughter to spy for you!

Am now waiting for everyone to go to bed. Once they do, Raven and I will emerge from hiding and implement whatever Regret Maneuvers might be necessary to get Dottie to tell me Sabbath's location. Will report later.

Later

Oh no oh no oh no oh no…

I just realized WHY it's so terrible that Dottie has Sabbath's memories of me.

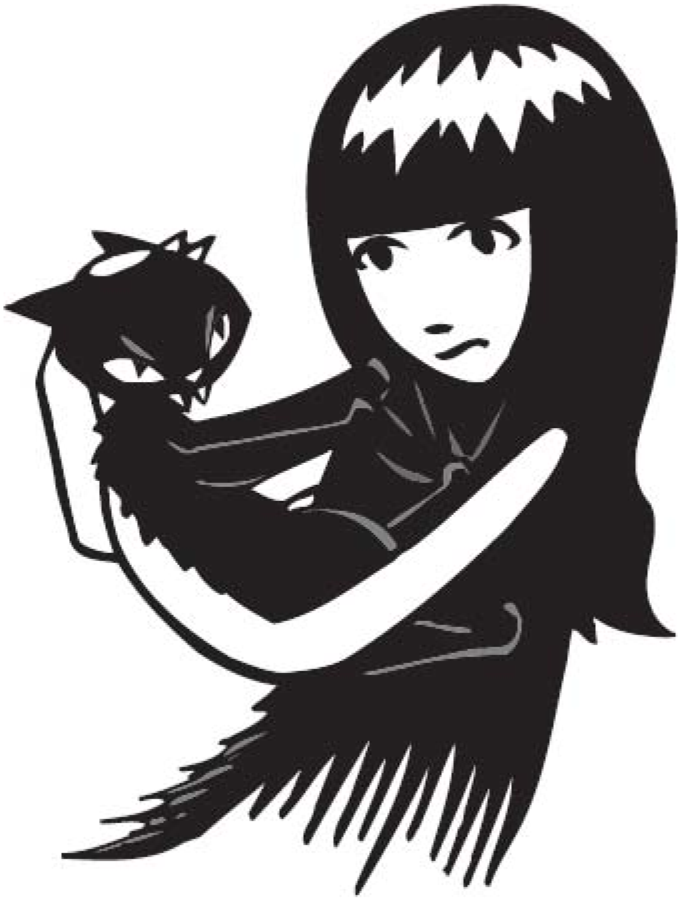
It means that SABBATH doesn't have them anymore.

If I'd known this could happen, I would have worn the entire Posse in a backpack night and day, puke and claws and all!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Later

I have Sabbath! He does not appear to know me! Am not sure how to feel. Mostly terrible, although I'm SOOOOOOO glad to have him back. But I REALLY wish he knew who I was! The blank look in his eyes when he stares at me…it hurts, man, it hurts!!!!

Anyway, here's how it all went down:



1. I burst out of the closet whispering, “RAVEN! NOW!” as loudly as I dared.
2. And had a terrifying moment waiting for Raven to scramble out from under Dottie’s bed.
3. But soon Dottie was safely corralled, golem-style, for Revenge and Questioning.
4. Vented my rage and frustration at her for approx. 13 minutes while Raven applied Regret Maneuvers B and C.
5. Then, since Dottie still maintained she did not know where Sabbath was being held, we simply took her along with us to Attikol’s hotel.
6. While making it very clear to her that Regret Maneuvers D and E would be applied with pleasure should she refuse to participate in the next stage of the plan.
7. Which was to locate SOMEONE in Attikol’s entourage who knew where my cat was.
8. And have Dottie extract the information we needed.
9. We began by sneaking in the window of the room where Jakey was being held captive.
10. And found Sabbath there as well.
11. Debated whether I should take the opportunity to rescue Jakey from his guards, since they were sound asleep.
12. But with nowhere to store him, nothing to feed him, and no desire to give Attikol one more reason to come after me, I was forced to leave him in captivity.

13. So, despite one bad moment when it looked like Sharpie might wake up, we maintained ninja-quality stealth, and got Sabbath out.

Tried along the way to get some information out of Dottie. Here’s how that went:

Me
Dude! Rip a kittycat’s thoughts so he doesn’t know his owner anymore? Cold, REAL cold. I don’t care how much you’re getting paid. Why’re you being such a little tool?

Dottie
Your cat isn’t really my concern. I need to think of MY future, here.

Me
You know your rebellious streak doesn’t have long to live, right? Eventually you’ll give in to your inherited civic pride…just like every Bright Girl does.

D.
Not me! I swear I will NEVER get a law degree or study foreign diplomacy or become a city planner or run for mayor or give a flying fig about the public good. And I’ll never apologize for using my talent to further my film career.

Me
Yeah yeah. Have it your way. I don’t have much in the way of civic pride myself. And I’d WAY rather make films than have a career in politics. In fact, I’m making a film about this trip to Seasidetown. And you’re in it!

D.
That’s a lie. I’ve never seen you with a camera.

Me
I don’t use a camera—not since I built the ThoughtCorder.

D.
Oh right. Saw that in Sabbath’s thoughts. I guess that works all right…if you make MONSTER movies…but I’m more interested in historical documentaries, myself.

Me
Oh, it’s AMAZING for historical documentaries. You can dramatize events, re-create epic battles, stage fictionalized interviews with dead people…anything!

D.
See, Attikol was right about you. You really do have a great imagination.

Me
He said that?

D.
Nah, it was in the stuff I pulled from his mind, actually.
[Blowing air disgustedly.]
Sheesh, that guy…You know the ancestral treasure he’s here to find? The big irony is, he doesn’t know what to do with it when he finds it!

Me
[Amazed that Dottie is finally giving forth with a little intel.]
You don’t say!

D.
So he figures he'll just copy you. That's why he paid me to rip the blueprints for your inventions. And, I'll warn ya, if he ever does capture you, watch out for real!

Me
Why?

D.
Oh, he'll be giving me the big money to go for the Big Rip.

Me
The…Big…Rip?

D.
Yeah. Rip EVERYTHING. Just leave you blank.

Me
[Chuckling weakly.]
[Sick chills running down my spine.]
You wouldn't!

D.
Be real! One semi-friendly conversation doesn't mean I'll throw over my best-paying client ever!

OK! No matter how little I may respect Attikol's ability to capture me, I am making a HUGE note to self: DO NOT GET CAPTURED BY ATTIKOL. Dottie has made it clear that our shared interest in documentary filmmaking is not going to stand in the way when it comes to putting herself through film school.

Man, that right there is a whopping difference between her and me. I am absolutely the kind of person to throw away practical considerations on a whim. If our positions were reversed, and someone were offering ME big money to destroy Dottie's mind? I know I'd want to be able to look back and say, Yeah, I coulda scored some serious money on that one…but I did the noble thing and said no. Though, to be honest, it's not even doing the noble thing so much as doing the IMPRACTICAL thing that appeals to me.

But that, alas, is NOT Dottie.

Anyway. On the subject of young Dottie, I find it interesting that her cinematic interests lie in the realm of documentaries. Am starting to formulate a plan for how I could maybe, just maybe, "make the bridge" for her, bring on her civic pride, and ensure she would never go for the Big Rip when it comes to my mind!

Long day. Heading to bed. Am hoping to spend a little quality snuggling time with the Posse and get Sabbath used to me again!

May 21

How wonderful that we have met with a paradox.
Now we have some hope of making progress.
—Niels Bohr

What with all the catnapping drama, I've been missing critical conversations right and left! Here's what happened in the lab while I was asleep:

Attikol
Well, nerds? What progress have you made on my devices?

BrownTown
We're, uh, testing a number of different approaches…

A.
So, you're clueless? Trying things at random? Is that what you're telling me?

B.T.
Look. Before you call in your thugs again, let me explain something to you about these blueprints. Not to get too technical or anything, but they are

COMPLETELY FREAKING INSANE.

A.
How do you figure?

B.T.
Well, for example, page fifty-four calls for stripping out the zinc ions from human gly-oxalase…using bat sweat.

A.
And you don’t have bat sweat?

B.T.
[Sighing.]
No, but I think you’ll find the bat sweat easier to locate than liquid black rock, which is called for on pages two, three, six, nine, eleven, 13, twenty-three, twenty-seven…

A.
Yes, yes. Very well. [Clapping his hands.] Work on the blueprints is postponed for now. The team has a new assignment: Find the liquid black rock!

B.T.
Any clues on that?

A.
[Frustrated grunt.]
It HAS to be around here someplace. Underground, maybe.

B.T.
Oh. Great. Glad you’re able to be so specific.

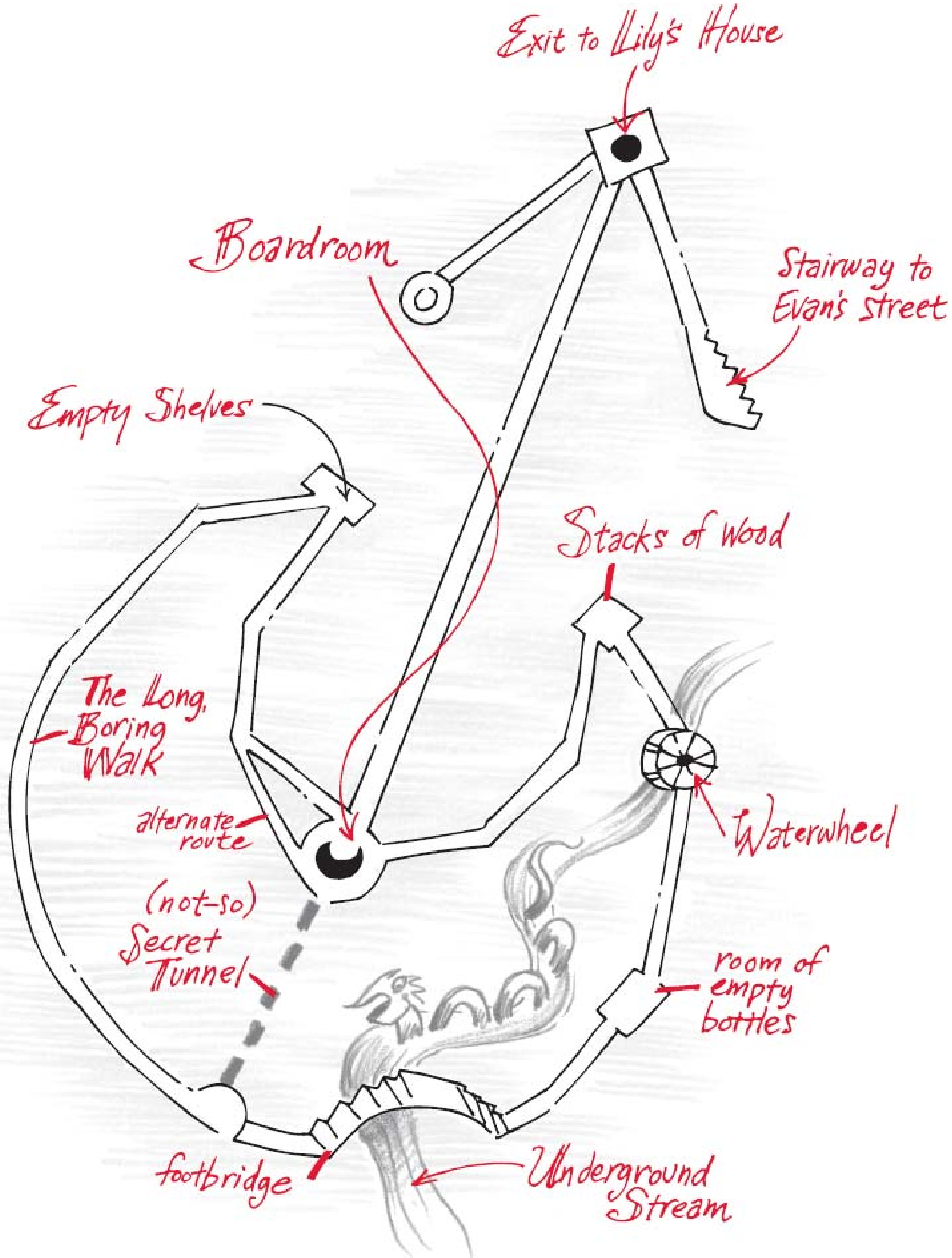
Unholy flammerbarkus!! Attikol is scaring me a little right now. I mean, he seems so sure that there's black rock in Seasidetown. Am glad he doesn't know WHERE exactly, but still…

Still…I'm gonna put everything on hold and head underground myself, make sure there isn't anything black-rockish in my ancestral tunnels for them to find!

A LOT later—sitting in the Boardroom

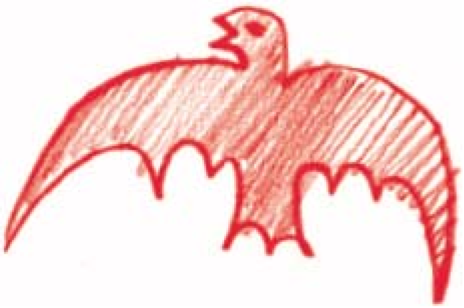
Am tired and very dusty! The cats and Raven and I have been all through the tunnels tonight. Luckily I didn't see any evidence of either black rock or engineers in the tunnels. Hopefully, if there is any black rock to be found in Seasidetown, I will beat them to it!

Anyway, in the process of exploring, I've mapped the tunnels completely.


Exit to Lily's House
Boardroom
Stairway to Evan's street
Empty Shelves
Stacks of Wood
The Long, Boring Walk
Waterwheel
alternate route
(not-so) Secret Tunnel
room of empty bottles
footbridge
Underground Stream

I'm actually kind of bewildered about how different the tunnels are from what I saw back in the day. Like I keep telling myself, two hundred years IS a long time, and tunnels could collapse and need to be re-dug… but, I don't know, it just doesn't really look like that's happened here. And what about the symbol the tunnels used to make? In 1790, when Lily and I first saw the complete map, we both recognized it as something special, something full of Dark Girl meaning and significance.

I look at this map that I've drawn tonight, and I don't get that feeling at all.



Well. That's neither here nor there, I guess. The important thing is that there's no black rock, nothing at all of interest, for the team to find.

I should probably mention one slightly interesting thing that happened in the tunnels. I was exploring a dead end to make sure it was good and dead. The dirt in this area was pretty crumbly, and a lot of the walls had been strengthened with beams and boards. I was just giving all the boards a good tapping and knocking to be sure they weren't, like, hiding a secret room or anything. And when I pushed on the end of this one beam, it slid inward a long way—maybe ten feet—and then I could hear a sort of small cave-in on the other side of the boards. Raven and the cats and I cleared out really fast, just in case the tunnel started to go. Should probably get back in there once the dust settles to see what's what. Am hoping I did not cause some kind of revealing sinkhole at the surface!

Later

Have put my plan for "making the bridge" into action. Raven and I snuck into Dottie's bedroom and woke her up. And I invited her to come to the Boardroom tomorrow night for an evening of documentary film and ThoughtCorder demonstration.

She was actually pretty touched…a side effect I hadn’t really considered.

* * *

Dottie
You do realize that friendly gestures aren’t going to change my mind about working for Attikol, right?

Me
Totally understood. I’m working some other angles re: thwarting that guy.

D.
Well, as long as we’re clear on that, I would love to see your documentary film and your ThoughtCorder. It’s…um…nice of you.

Me
Oh, you’re doing me a favor, being my first test audience.

D.
Well…still, it’s nice.
[Laughing awkwardly.]
I wish more people had bodyguards like Raven. Maybe then they wouldn’t be scared to hang out with me.

Me
Oh…
[VERY uncomfortably.]
Well, gotta go.

D.
Hey…on the subject of thwarting Attikol…

Me.
Yeah?

D.

Well, I’m gonna give those summoning instructions to him and only him, like we agreed—

Me.
[Tired.]
Yes. I got that. You’ve been very clear—

D.
[Interrupting me.]
—once two conditions have been satisfied: First, you have to be safely incarcerated. Second, Jakey has to be escorted out of town. Ivac will call me when they get to Salem. Then, and only then, I’m supposed to call Attikol and give him the instructions.

Me.
[Surprised…very surprised.]
Oh. Well, thank you. That is very intriguing. And possibly helpful.

D.
[Shrugging.]
Can’t hurt to keep it interesting, right?

So yeah! This new info really wrinkles up my plans. In a good way, I think. I might actually be able to manipulate this to my advantage!

Later

Dottie has double-crossed me again!

Although…to be honest…it's exactly what I expected her to do.

So is it still double-crossing if the double-crosser is playing right into your hands???

Whatever. The important thing here is that the situation is still under my control and events are playing out according to plan!

Even though I AM writing this from inside a cage.

That's right. I have allowed myself to be trapped—in a cage that snapped up around me as I stepped into the Boardroom. Moments later, I came face-to-face with the engineers for the first time…they crowded around, excited yet humble, muttering little "sorrys" and "excuse mes" as they lifted the cage, oh so gently, and brought it upstairs to the lab.

Have just been hanging out in here getting caught up on my journal, monitoring FelinoMobileTranscriptoSpies, and waiting for the right moment before I pick the lock and escape. The engineers eventually got tired of standing around gazing worshipfully at me, and have (sort of) returned to their work…though very little is getting done.

Pigpen
[Very, very hesitantly.]
Um…Miss? If I could ask just one little question…?

Me
You may ask.

P.
[Gushing.]
How did you come up with the coordinates for recalibrating the syntaxicometer? I mean, that’s like, it’s really, y’know…

GubGub
Dude, quit bothering her! Can’t you see she’s busy?

Oh—but I should document what happened before I landed in this cage. Before even leaving the kiosk, I spent some time briefing NeeChee, Miles, and Mystery on their new assignment—to follow Dottie and Attikol. Tested the printers that are networked to their collar TranscriptoSpies and pocketed them. Gave Raven her assignment (guard Sabbath and stay away from Great-Aunt Lily’s house).

And then walked over to Great-Aunt Lily’s house.

There was a new lock on the door…

…a simple store-bought padlock.

I took this as a good sign. Not because it made it easy for me to get in (though I went through that lock so quickly, it practically flew open the second I touched it), but because it meant my adversaries were no longer trying to keep me out. No, they were making sure I got into their trap.

And the placement of the cage in the Boardroom? THAT meant Dottie had informed Attikol and company of Film Night, as I expected her to. It meant everyone was acting according to my plan!

I figure it’ll take Ivac a little under an hour to get Jakey to Salem, maybe half an hour more for Dottie to get the word and call Attikol. The cats will be monitoring her with TranscriptoSpies, and I’ll be eagerly scanning the TranscriptoFeeds for the moment she reveals the summoning instructions. Then I’ll pick the lock on the cage and escape before Attikol can embark on the “Big Rip” phase of his plans for me.

And THEN I can move on to MY phase two: Summon black rock, discover my Dark Girl talent, and blow this town!!!!!!

Later

Feeds are coming through from the felines.

Dottie
Hello? Oh hey, Ivac. Where are you? OK, I’m calling Attikol now. [Pause…dialing.]

Attikol? Dottie. Ivac just called from Salem. Jakey's out of range and Emily's in the cage. Do you remember what this means? Well, don't worry about it. Look, your instructions are in locker 1422 at the bus depot downtown. The concierge at your hotel is holding the key for you.
[Pause…listening.]
OK, sure, I'll head out now. Meet me over there. And bring your checkbook!

OK, not to worry…slight wrinkle. I was hoping Miles and NeeChee could catch Dottie giving Attikol the instructions, but I guess Dottie and Attikol added a layer of protection in case anyone was eavesdropping. I will just have to get the info out of Attikol later.

Right now I need Attikol to hurry up and get that information into his mind before I break free!

But I also need to break free before Dottie arrives to give me the Big Rip!

Delicate balance. Am monitoring all the cats' feeds simultaneously. Meanwhile, maintaining calm exterior so the engineers do not get suspicious.

Later

OK. Attikol has the key and is on his way to the bus depot. Dottie is two blocks away—close enough to make me VERY nervous.

I know that if I start working on the lock, the engineers are going to alert Attikol…

But I absolutely can't risk Dottie ripping my mind!

Things are about to get hairy. Am going to stop writing now. Am going to rely on the TranscriptoSpy to record events. Hopefully this is not the last thing I ever write in this diary!!!!!!

Quite a bit later

I still have my mind!

Here's what has transpired:

Me

[Whispering into the TranscriptoSpy.]

OK. I’ve just started to examine the lock. No one seems to have…Oh well. GubGub has noticed and is on his way over here. BrownTown is picking up his phone. Oh vaxhags. The lock is a compression-spring mechanism. Very tough. Probably should have started working on it five minutes ago. If only I hadn’t broken into Aunt Lily’s house so many times…and taught my adversaries so much about my lock-picking skills…I’d probably be dealing with a MUCH be dealing with a MUCH easier lock right now! Gonna have to get the casing off. BrownTown has hung up the phone. He’s coming over. I’m getting my wedges placed around the casing. BrownTown and GubGub are standing a couple feet away, just watching.

[Speaking normally now.]

Step right up, folks, enjoy the show…All right! Just cracked the casing off. K, this is weird, I’ve broken the compression spring, but the lock’s not releasing…OH FLAVVERBRATS. This isn’t really a compression-spring mechanism at all. It was just a compression-spring CASING…hiding an inner lock…made up of seven minilocks…each of a completely unique design. REALLY wish I’d started working on this sucker five minutes ago.

[Pointedly, to engineers.]

All the engineers are now standing around gawking at me. Very annoying. Not good for my concentration. Oh my frog, I hear Dottie at the front door! OK, opened the first minilock. BrownTown is getting his phone out again…Oh. He’s not calling Attikol…he’s taking video of me cracking the lock! Folks, the pressure is really on! I’ve opened the second minilock. Opened the third minilock. Fingers getting sweaty. Have destroyed seven of my favorite picks. Dottie is in the room. OK, I’m backing away from the lock. Must stay away from her poison touch no matter what!

Dottie
THIS is the cage you use? I can’t reach her in there!

[Long silence from the engineers.]

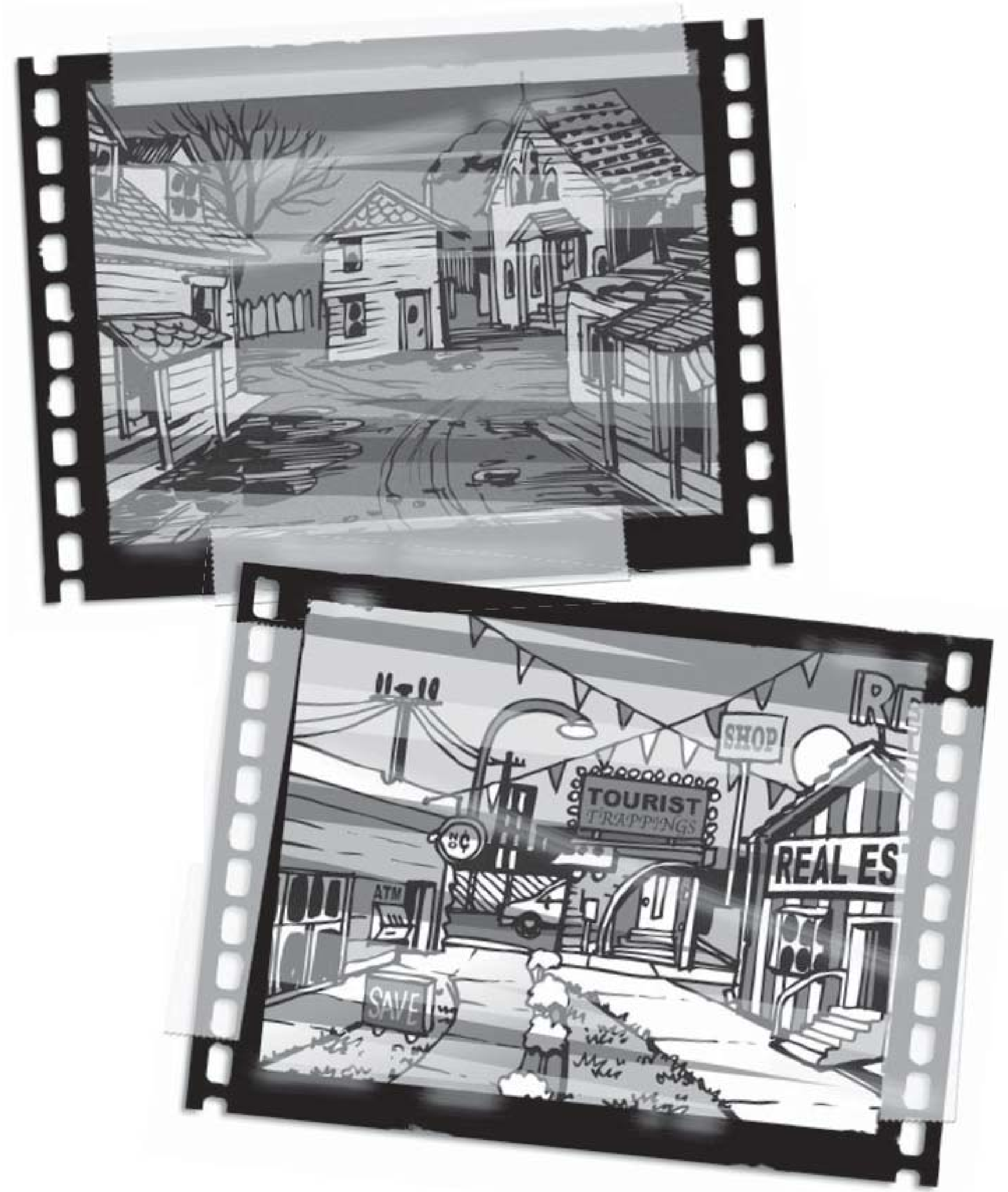
GubGub
[Reluctantly.]
I’ll get a broom. Maybe we can trap her in the corner.

D.
[Heavy sarcasm.]
Oh, well, take your time.

Me
Hey, Dottie, while we’re waiting, how about we go ahead and have Film Night? I brought my ThoughtCorder.

D.
[Staring at me, eyebrows raised.]
Uh………..
[Shrugging.]
Sure, why not?

So, using the back wall of the lab as a screen, I started projecting my mini-documentary on the aesthetic decline of Seasidetown through the ages. Opening with my memories of picturesque 1790 Seasidetown, transitioning through the gradual commodification of its Revolutionary history, and culminating in a montage of the most garish, plasticized, hideously commercial, and inauthentic aspects of current-day Seasidetown, it tugged at the heartstrings and made even the emotionally challenged Donkey shed a tear.


RE
SHOP
TOURIST
TRAPPINGS
8¢
REAL ES
ATM
SAVE

Then!

Now!
(Boooo!)

Unfortunately it didn't have the desired effect on Dottie.

Dottie
[Clapping politely.]
That was very nice. If you like Seasidetown.

Me
[Crestfallen.]
You don't like
Seasidetown?

D.
I'm leaving the second I get into film school. OK…guys, how about that broom? Attikol will be here soon, and I'd like to get this going.

GubGub
[Stepping forward with the broom. Pushing the handle through the cage bars at me.]
OK…Stand still, now…seriously, don't—OWWWWW!

Me
Try that again and I'll sprain your other wrist.

D.
Great, guys! Why don't you just GIVE HER A WEAPON? Hey—OWWW!

Me
[Back to narrating.]
OK, I have the broom pinned between my arm and chest. I'm using it to push Dottie away from the cage. I'm working on the lock again. BrownTown's got the camera on me. I've opened the fourth minilock.

D.
Guys, Attikol is gonna show up any minute. Could we PLEASE make some progress on restraining her?

BrownTown
Actually, Dottie, I don't see why we should help you destroy one of the finest lock-picking minds I've ever encountered.

D.
Because no one gets in the way of me doing my job. One touch from me, and all your scientific knowledge will be gone.

Me
I've opened the fifth minilock. Oh ratscabs—Dumpling and Donkey just got a cable around my waist. They're pulling me to the back of the cage. I'm trying to cut the cable, but it's not working! OH MY FRABWAX—is this—

Speedy
It's tempered unniliquadium alloy!

Me
GLABTACK IT! I don't have anything that'll cut this! How dare you! Using my own alloy to trap me—the nerve!

Pigpen
Uh…boss? Are we really gonna stand by and let this happen?

D.
You'd better not get in my way, little man, if you want to know your name two minutes from now.

B.T.
[With deep regret.]
I do hate to see a mind like that go to waste…especially right before she's finished cracking that lock. But I don't think we have a choice.

D.
[Stepping close to the bars.]
Thank you, gentlemen.

Me
[Straining as far away from Dottie as possible.]
Dottie, no! NOOOOOO!!!! I have another film to show you!

D.
[Reaching her hand through the bars toward me.]
Nah…that's cool. Once I rip your thoughts, I can look at ALL your little films anytime I want.

Me
[Talking faster than I ever have in my life.]
Not this one…I'm making it up on the spot! It's a documentary about Attikol's unethical labor practices—about how he kept a young psychic working without pay, against his will; denied him contact with his family, forcibly shaved his head, subjected him to verbal abuse and thought-ripping; made him perform his unique talent in front of crowds of strangers, night after night, town after town—

D.
[Frowning.]
Jakey's working without pay?

Me
Attikol has never given him a penny!

D.
[Removing her hand from the cage. Placing it on her hip in indignation.]
A special talent like his needs to be respected.

Me
And nurtured.

D.
And fairly compensated.

Me
[Seeing a small ray of light (ray of Bright?) in the darkness. Clutching at it with all my strength.]
Well said, Bright Girl!

D.
What Attikol’s doing is just not right. In fact…that is SLAVERY, is what that is.

Me
[My hopes growing.]
But a young documentary filmmaker could infiltrate Attikol’s Caravan of Wonders, expose his slave-driving ways, rescue the young psychic from slavitude, and bring honor to her town and family.

Speedy
[One finger raised.]
Um…"slavitude" is not a word—

D.
[Eyes shining.]
AND lay the groundwork for a HUGE film-school scholarship and a celebrated career.

Me
[Hardly daring to believe it.]
Dottie? Have you just…did you…are you gonna…?

D.
[Shedding a single tear.]
[Raising one fist in the air and pumping it exultantly.]

Bright Girls, I WILL make you proud! I—I have to go. I’m gonna need a camera—so much to do—

And she ran out of the lab.

Me
Frakkling jibwax. That was a close one.

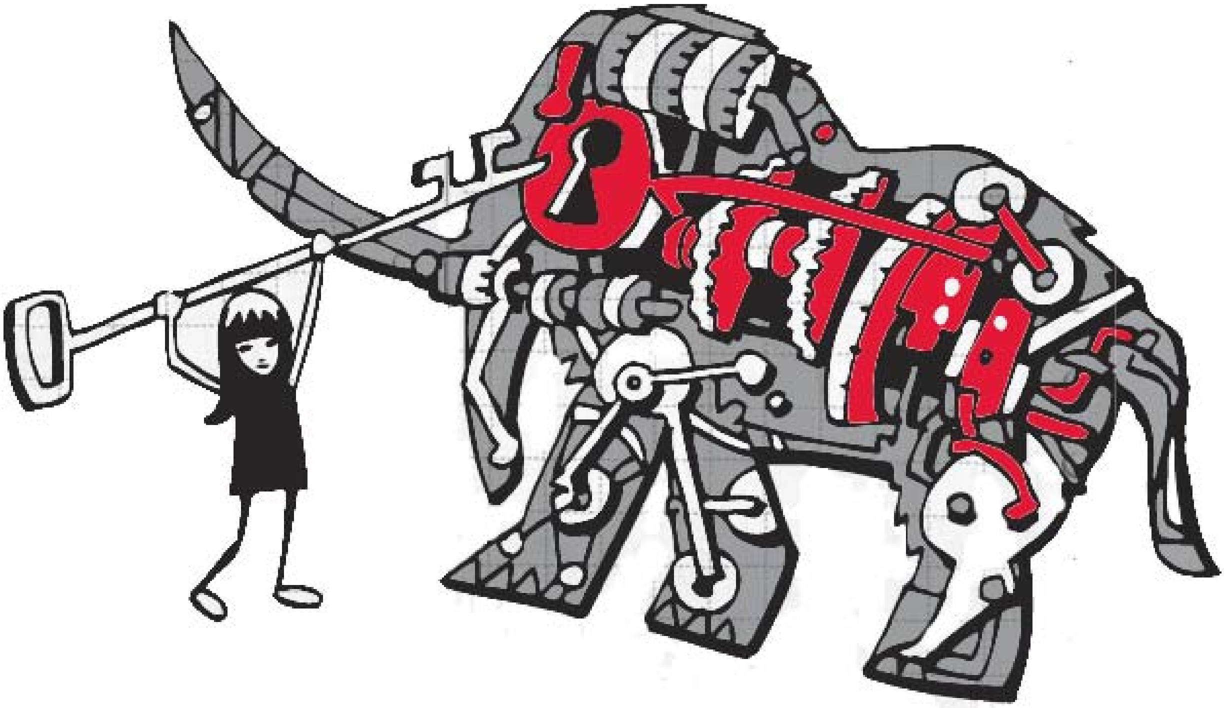
S.
Um…you still have a tempered unniliquadium cable around your waist—

BrownTown
Hey, guys, get that off her, would you? I need to see how she finishes my Mastodon Lock! This video’s going up on my blog as soon as she’s done!

Me
[Nodding my thanks to
Dumpling and Speedy as they release the cable.]
[Stepping up to the lock once again.]
So. YOU’RE the lockmaster? Wow. I’d like to shake your hand. Once I get out, that is.

B.T.
I’ve been meaning to ask…didn’t I see you at LockSportCon last year?

Me
[Recognition dawning.]
At the panel on machining picks at home? Right! Loved your presentation.



The dreaded Mastodon lock!

B.T.
Loved yours.

Me
Well…shall we?

B.T.
[Commencing with his video.]
Pick away!

Me
…And that’s the sixth minilock. I have now broken my last pick to useless splinters. Gonna have to improvise. Pulling out a few strands of my hair…twisting them on themselves…folding…twisting again…now to apply a little doxysilicate and OW OW some slight burning of the fingertips, nothing serious, the proteins in the hairs are now hardened beyond the tensile strength of steel…Dumpling is taking notes on my technique…I’m using the hair pick now to move the tumblers in minilock seven…It’s a

masterful design; truly I’m in awe of the lockmaster’s prowess…BUT…I am afraid that the Mastodon Lock has fallen. And with that…
[Stepping out of the cage.]
Oh.
[Suddenly very tired.]
Hello, Attikol.

Attikol
What is she doing out of the cage? Where is Dottie? What is going on here?

Me
[Thinking fast.]
Dottie’s not here yet. But I don’t think you’ll be needing her. Seeing as you have already won the final battle!

A.
I have?

Me
[Giving fierce warning glares to the confused engineers.]
Why, yes! Wasn’t it you who summoned the black rock?

A.
Um…yes…?

Me
[Helpfully.]
I mean that fountain of black rock right behind you.

A.
[Whipping around.]
[Goggling at the fountain of black liquid I was ThoughtProjecting in the rear corner of the lab.]
Black rock!

Me

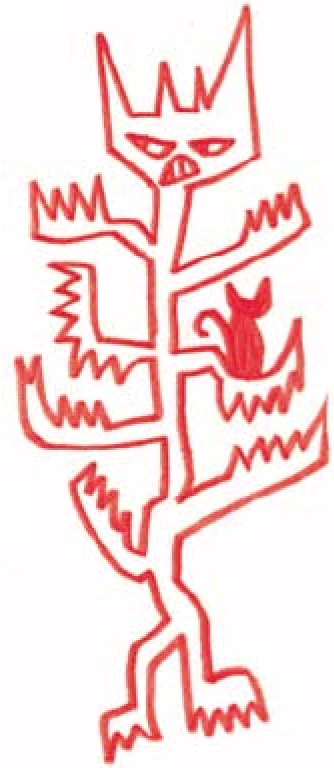
Yes, black rock, indeed! And congratulations to you. Though you'll probably want to do some testing to see if this is REALLY your ancestral treasure.

A.
Errr…yes. Testing.

Me
For example, maybe you should imagine the black rock taking the shape of…I don't know…Mayor Ebenezer?

A.
Good ideAIIIEEAA! It worked!

B.T.
[Getting into the spirit of things.]
[Dropping to his knees.]
Mother of Pearl! Your powers!



A.
My…powers!

Me
That proves it! You have summoned the black rock! You HAVE won the final battle!

A.
[Apparently in shock.]
…Yes!

Me
[Encouraging him.]
You now possess this wondrous fluid! And all the power that comes with it!

A.
I…do!

Me
[Encouraging…Encouraging…]

A.

The ThoughtCorder…The DuplicatoDevice…The Time-Out Machine…all these and more at your fingertips!

A.
Uh-huh!

Me.
[Getting tired of this.]
No one can stop you now!

A.
[Finally…warming up to Gloat Mode.]
Tell me something I don't know.

Me
Actually…why don't YOU tell ME? How DID you do it?

A.

[Still looking slightly stunned…but starting to focus on his triumph.]
For 13 centuries, my family has held one secret close to their hearts—this ancient poem: "Celisse dubrayer felidoo / Veribratzer chumb / Saximumber wergivoo / Plimma, farba, trumm.”

Me
[Barely managing a blank stare. Fighting back laughter at Attikol reciting this gibberish in the middle of his Evil Overlord moment.]

A.
Loosely translated, the poem says that the 13th Shady Uncle—that’s on MY side of the family—must battle the 13th Dark Girl—that’s YOUR side—for control of the black rock. Whichever one of us grants the other one his or her deepest wish wins!

Me
I see…

A.
AND, here’s the really SAD part. Sad for you, that is! I haven’t just won for myself, but for the next 13 Shady Uncles! BWUHAHHAHAH!

Me
Horrors! But tell me, O Wise Uncle Attikol…Where did I go wrong? What did you give me that was my deepest wish?

A.
Black rock, you fool!

Me
…And when did you give me black rock, exactly?

A.
[Hearty laughter.]
Have you forgotten the inheritance letter? Supposedly sent from your aunts? Brilliant, wasn’t it?

Me
[Light going on in my brain.]
Oh. That does make a lot more sense now.

A.
[Lost in booming laughter as he reflects on his triumph.]

Me
Well, I appreciate this little talk. I’m sure I speak for all the Dark Girls when I say that truly you are a worthy adversary, and, well, I guess we’ll see you in another 1,300 years!

And before he knew what was happening, I was out a window and gone.

Later

Am back at the kiosk. Recuperating from the drama of the past hour by sitting under a pile of cats and pondering all that has gone down.

My top thoughts right now:

1. Am feeling really lucky that my deepest wish wasn't something easy for Attikol to grant, like a shiny new penny.
2. And that it wasn't enough for Attikol to just write a letter "giving" me my deepest wish.
3. And that he would've needed to possess the black rock before he could give it to me—but he'd need to give it to me before he could possess it. Nice!
4. Though he doesn't seem at all fazed by this paradox.
5. Demonstrating once again the irony of paradoxes: Only reasonably intelligent people are flummoxed by them.
6. Anyhoodle…I have a small window of opportunity here while Attikol thinks he has the black rock.
7. Cuz black rock CAN'T be his deepest wish anymore, if he thinks he has it…right?
8. I just gotta find out what was #2 on his list—his CURRENT deepest wish, in other words—and somehow give him THAT.
9. Preferably before he realizes that he doesn't actually have the black rock and starts to wish for it again.
10. But what if his current deepest wish is something tough, like money, fame, or power?
11. Cuz I really don't see how I would give him any of those things.
12. Well, no use what-iffing myself into a tizzy. Clearly the first step is to find out what his current deepest wish might be. It could just as easily be along the lines of a shiny new penny!
13. Looks like I need to hop in the van and go see Jakey in Salem!

Later

No need to hop in the van. Have read the feeds. Ivac is bringing Jakey back to Seasidetown in time for the next show. Will meet up with him there!

Later

Bad news! I now know what Attikol's current deepest wish is…but it's something I can't give him.

Me
How was your little road trip to Salem?

Jakey
S'okay. Whazzup?

Me
Could you do a little fishing in Attikol's mind for me? I urgently need to know what his current deepest wish is. Second to the black rock, I mean.

J.
Ewwwwww!

Me
I wouldn't put you through this if I didn't REALLY need to know.

J.
[Sighing.] [Frowning.]
[Concentrating.]
[Looking stunned.]
Uh…you're not going to like this.

Me
[Being semi-destroyed by suspense.]
Well? What is it?

J.
Um…it's…YOU.

Me
[Unleashing the "ew" heard round the world.]
EWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW
WWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW WWWWWWWWWWWWWW

J.
Wait—I should have said YOUR MIND.

Me
Please. Explain.

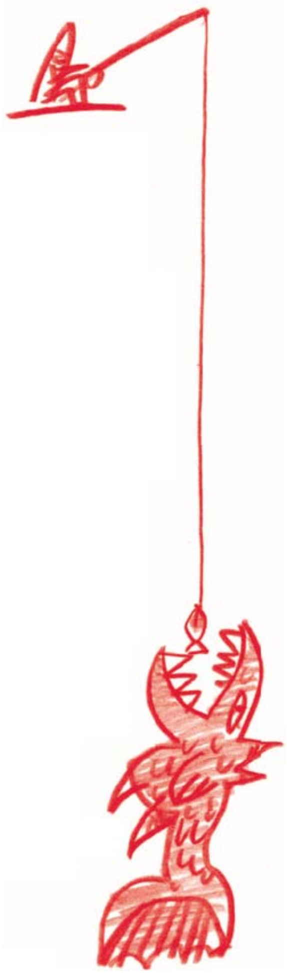
J.
All that stuff he got from my mind about you…it made him pretty jealous of you. Not just the things you can do, but the things you can IMAGINE doing. Cuz, you know, when he thought he had control over the black rock…well, he couldn't really think of anything to DO with it.

Me
That's pretty much what Dottie said. So, he wants my mind? That's terrible! I need him to want something I can give him.

J.

Well, I'll keep you posted if anything else comes up. Maybe something shiny will catch his eye and you can give it to him before he buys it himself.

Aw flivvergrax. How disappointing! I felt like I was doing so well at thwarting Attikol for a while there. And now I've hit a wall. Am I EVER going to get my black rock? Am starting to feel sort of desperate. Mind turning to mush. Am going to bed.



May 22

I'm sick of following my dreams. I'm just going to ask them where they're goin', and hook up with them later.
—Mitch Hedberg

Am sitting in the audience for Ümlaut’s show. Would really like to forget my worries for a bit…but am painfully aware that my time in Seasidetown is fast running out. Thus, am multitasking. Have been monitoring the feeds on Dottie very closely while I wait for the show to begin. Here is one interesting snippet:

Dottie
Mom! Mom! You’re not gonna believe this—

Mayor Ebenezer
[Sharp gasp.]
Oh! My precious little girl! You’ve come into your civic pride! I can see it in your eyes!

D.
Are you sure? Because I still want to go to film school, I still think it’s only fair that I get paid for using my talent, and I still hate the idea of holding public office.

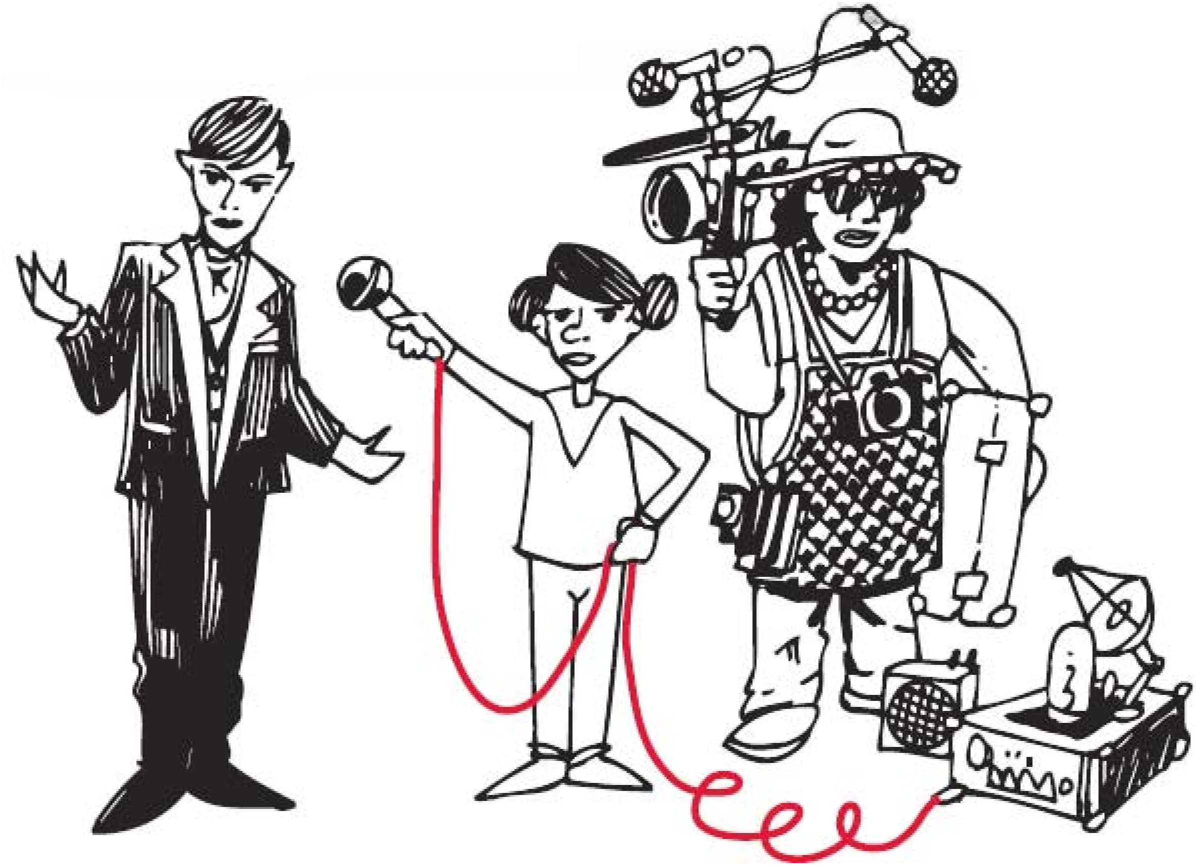
M.E.
I have no doubt! Tell me all about it!

D.
I want to be a documentary filmmaker and direct award-winning muckraking pictures, starting with an exposé of enforced unpaid child labor in Attikol’s Caravan of Wonders!

M.E.
Enforced…unpaid…labor? Oh, you ARE an Ebenezer! Your ancestors fought slavery and injustice, too, you know.

D.
So…you’re suddenly OK with me making movies?

M.E.
A Bright Girl must go where her pride leads her. And when you have enough evidence for a warrant, my police force will be right behind you!



Ümlaut spills his guts for Dottie!

Later

Have talked to Dottie. I ran into her interviewing Ümlaut after his show. She was accompanied by NannyGuard, who was loaded down with a very fancy camera and a lot of sound equipment. It looks like Attikol’s dollars are already at work furthering Dottie’s career!

Here’s what I caught before they wrapped up:

Dottie

Do you remember when Jakey joined the medicine show?

Ümlaut
Sure, he was just a toddler—barely walking and talking but already able to work a crowd.

D.
And were you aware that Attikol wasn't paying him?

Ü.
No, I always assumed he was. But I looked in his records like you asked. Here's what I found.
[Handing her a sheaf of papers.]
It's copies of Attikol's accounts from the past eight years. You were right—he's never paid Jakey anything!

D.
This is gold! But…well, it could mean the end of the Caravan of Wonders. I hope you realize that this might put your boss behind bars for a long time.

Ü.
[Chuckling.]
Of course! Anything else I can do, let me know.

And with that, Ümlaut bowed, tipped his hat to me and Dottie, and was gone.

Me
Sorry to interrupt. I guess you're making progress on that documentary, huh?

Dottie

Great progress! I gotta thank you for that hot tip you gave me on Attikol’s unethical labor practices. Do you realize he has taken Jakey into forty-six states and can be prosecuted for slavery in all of them?

Me
Nice!

D.
And don’t worry, I always credit my sources!

Me
Oh, I have other worries right now.

D.
Like what?

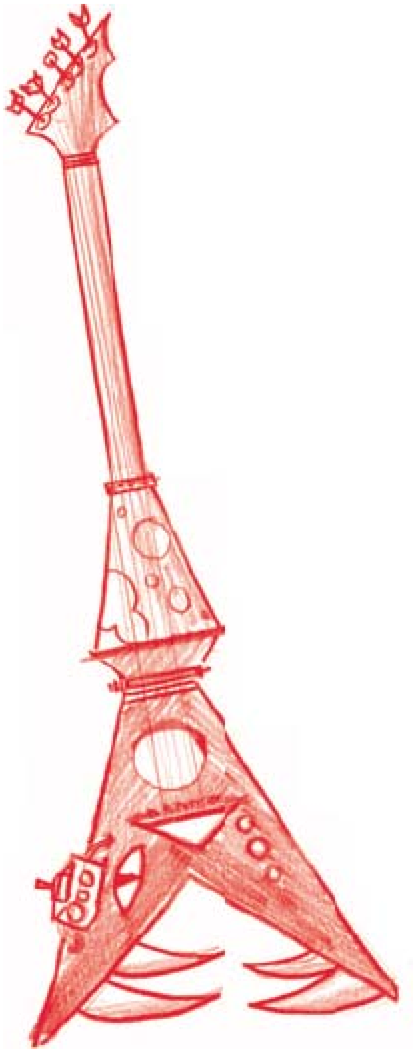
Me
I fooled Attikol into thinking he has the black rock. I might be able to summon it myself, IF I can grant his second-deepest wish. Which is for MY imagination and creativity. Kind of a sticky situation.

D.
What if I ripped your mind and gave it to him—that would satisfy the summoning instructions, wouldn’t it?

Me
[Laughing.]
Sure, I guess it would. Only it would leave me WITH NO MIND.

D.
[Waving her hand dismissively.]
Oh, I’d just give it all back to you later.

Me
UNHOLY GLAMMERJAX.
[Breathing weakly.]



You…can…do…that?

D.
Well, sure.

Me
[Banging head lightly with fist.] [Banging head heavily with fist.]

D.
Aw, lighten up. I owe you a free one, at least, for that tip. Here…
[Reaching out very quickly and touching me on the arm.]
There's your devices back. I don't mind getting rid of that stuff…pretty loony. Now, if you decide you want my services, just call. Here's my card.

Don’t worry…
[Wry smile.]
…now that I’m bursting with civic pride, I work on a sliding scale—you can definitely afford me!

Duuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuude!

Am seriously shaking my head at myself.

Why did I never question whether Dottie could return thoughts?

It is very nice—downright lovely—to have my inventions back in my head where they belong. And this bodes well for getting Jakey and Sabbath their thoughts and memories back as well.

Still, even with this proof that Dottie can return thoughts, even with the onset of her ancestral civic pride, I am a LONG way from agreeing to let her rip everything from my mind. I mean, how far can I really trust this girl? I need to consider her track record:

She cruelly ripped thoughts and memories from me, Jakey, and Sabbath!

On the other hand, now that I understand that she keeps ripped thoughts safely in her head, ripe for return at a later date, this does seem a bit less heinous.

She helped Attikol with his diabolical plans to steal my thoughts. ATTIKOL!!!!!

Yeah…but A) she recognized that he is a despicable dum-dum, AND B) she was just holding up her end of a business arrangement.

She tricked me with ye olde Rainbow Zombies rhyme.

To be fair, she WAS being paid to keep the summoning instructions safe for Attikol.

She let money be her number-one motivation. Uncool!

And yet somehow very democratic. She’ll help anyone who can pay her fee, without letting pesky things like friendship or loyalties get in her way.

She was willing to double-deal on Attikol.

But only when it didn’t conflict with their arrangements—she held those up to the letter!

She betrayed my friendly gesture of Film Night, told Attikol my plan, and thereby allowed his engineers to capture me!!!!!!

Oh, who am I kidding? Film Night was no friendly gesture; it was pure strategy. I WANTED to get captured!

So, to sum up: I may not always like Dottie’s motivation, but I can respect her integrity. If I make a business arrangement with her, I think I’m pretty confident that she will follow through on it!

And the fact is, after ten days in Seasidetown, I’ve made no progress in locating black rock.

What I truly need to ask myself is this:

Can I handle being without my thoughts, even temporarily?

Can I handle ATTIKOL getting my thoughts, even temporarily?

Am I willing to face those two terrifying things if it means summoning the black rock?

I think I am.

Later

Am painfully aware that Attikol is probably cracking the whip on the engineers, and that my window of opportunity will close very quickly if he starts to suspect that he doesn't truly have the black rock. I've been monitoring feeds from the lab. Am very cheered by what I'm seeing! Apparently they are trying to make amends for having helped Attikol in the past…that, or, having met me in person, their hero-worship can no longer be denied. Whatever. Here's what I read:

BrownTown
Hey, guys—how's the DeceptoDuplicatoDevice coming along?

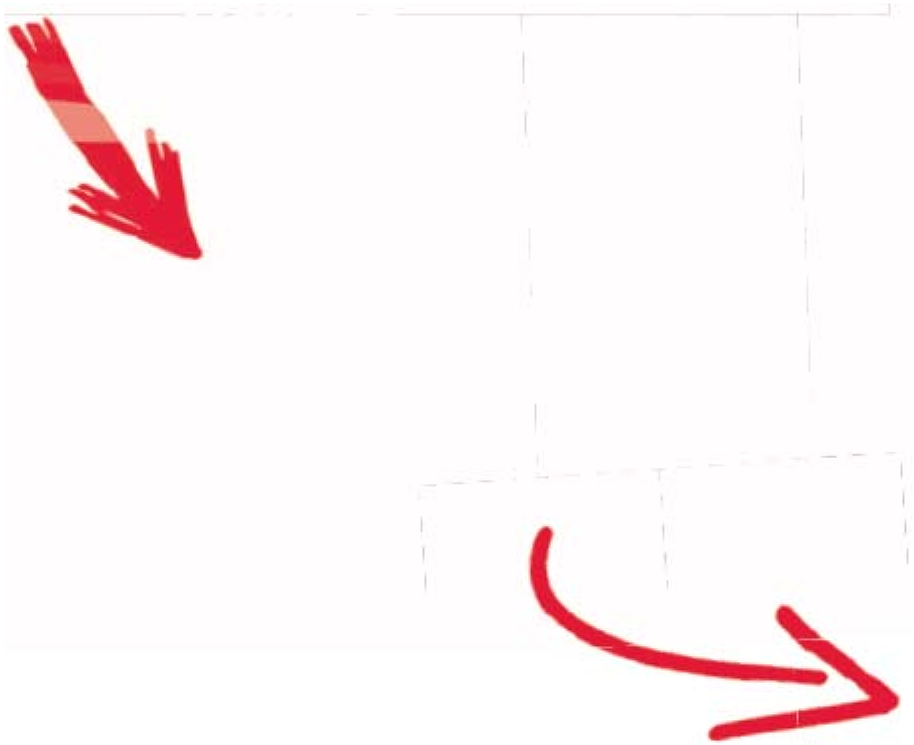
Speedy
Almost done. Just need to spray-paint it silver and fill the reservoir with black water.

B.T.
We got the stuffed bunnies?

GubGub
Seventy-six of them. All loaded in the hidden chamber.

B.T.
And did you make sure the controls look complicated but are simple enough for a four-year-old to operate?

Donkey
How does THIS look?



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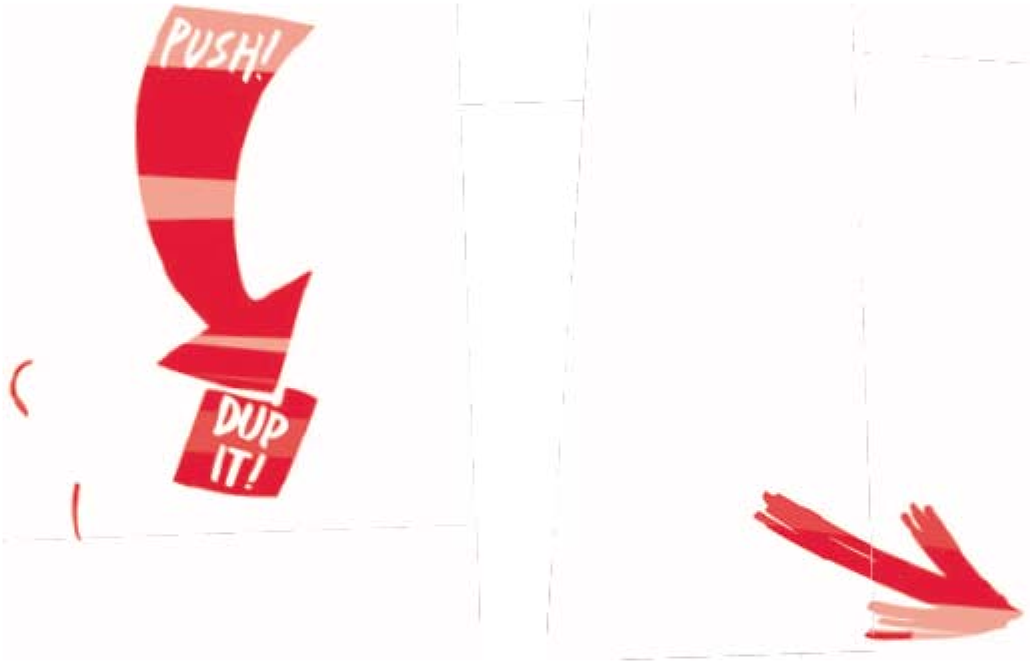
Am sorry to see skilled engineers using their talents to craft fake devices…but glad to see them using their creativity to thwart Attikol. Will keep a close eye on the situation. It would do my heart much good to watch Attikol play with a DeceptoDuplicatoDevice!!!



Later

All right. Just returned from meeting with Dottie at her house. Here's the plan we hammered out:

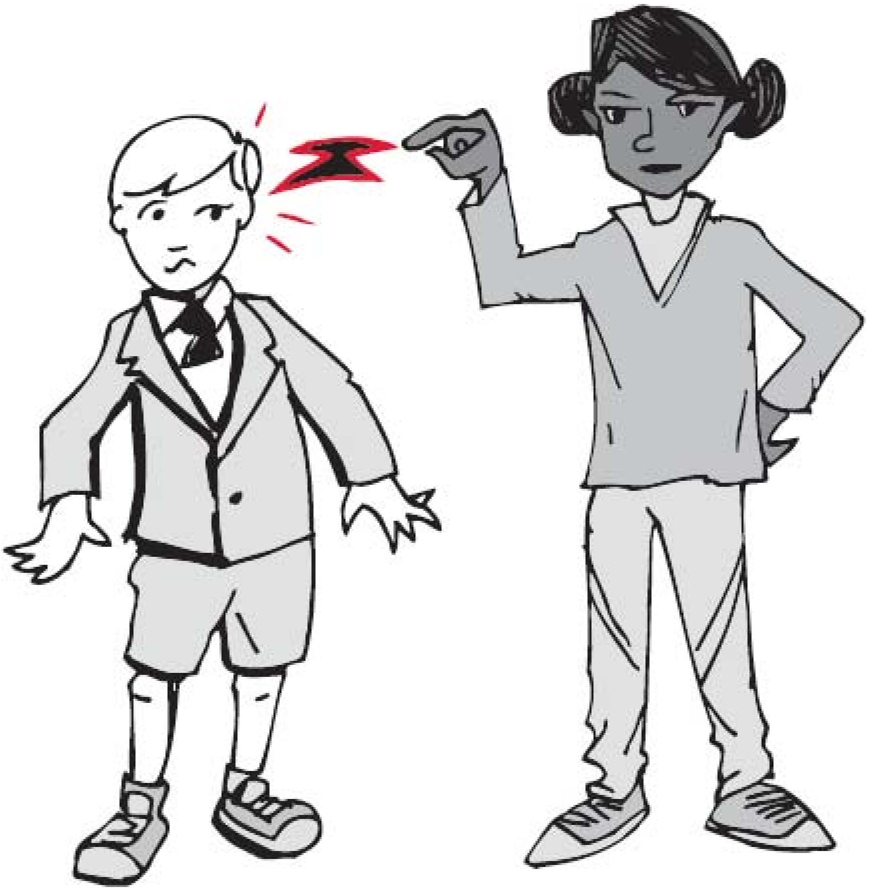
1. As a gesture of goodwill, I would ask Raven to let Dottie out of the chokehold for once.
2. And after reassuring me that she considered an exchange of money to be a binding contract, Dottie accepted $4 to promise never to reveal to Attikol that I was staying in the abandoned souvenir kiosk.
3. I agreed to hold her harmless for accepting an unspecified (but apparently LARGE) sum of money from Attikol to rip my complete thoughts and upload them all to his mind. >SHUDDER.<
4. For $2 she pledged to inform me of any future business arrangements she makes with Attikol, while keeping mine secret from him.
5. She took $6 to swear that once Attikol had my thoughts, she would get some kind of statement out of him to the effect that his deepest wish had been granted.
6. Another $8 ensured she would then extract my complete thoughts from Attikol's mind, leaving nary a notion behind.
7. For $13 she would subsequently return my complete, unharmed mind to me.

8. And for $3 she guaranteed to permanently rip certain thoughts and memories from Attikol’s mind, including ALMOST everything he knows about me and ALMOST everything he knows about the Shady Uncles. Yes. ALMOST everything—not the Big Rip! I considered it very carefully, but ~~decided to take the moral high road.~~ Oh, OK. Actually, I just want to leave him with enough mind to know he has been defeated!!!
9. For an additional $7 apiece, she assured me Sabbath and Jakey would get all their memories back.
10. She requested (and I granted) permission to peruse my thoughts while they were held in her mind, but only for purposes of strategy, if the situation happened to get sketchy.
11. If the worst happened, and I was left a mindless, drooling idiot, Dottie promised (for another $1) to inform my mother of my whereabouts.
12. And to make sure Mom was given my ThoughtCorder, which would contain at least a partial archive of my thoughts.
13. And to make sure Mom knew where my Living Will was stashed (hidden in a jar of marbles at the back of the refrigerator).

Later

Am hanging out in the kiosk with cats and Raven. Dottie returned Sabbath’s thoughts and memories to him on the spot (once I’d paid up, of course). It is SOOOO GOOD to see recognition in his eyes again! And to hear the retarded meows of love that are for me and me alone!

Have psychically informed Jakey that he’ll be receiving a visit from Dottie in the next hour and that he should not be afeard to let her deliver the mental goods. Also sent a big thank-you to him for going first. TECHNICALLY, I do trust her to do the job I’m paying her to do…after all, she did give me my devices back.



On a gut level, though, it’s a different story. It really, really scares me to make myself so vunerable to ANYONE. Swear to gob…if it wasn’t the only way to get my black rock…I’d never even consider this crazy plan.

So yeah.

Am monitoring the feed on Jakey’s trailer VERY carefully!

Later

OH YEAH!!!! Jakey has his memories back! Here are a few interesting snippets from the TranscriptoFeed:

Dottie
Hey, Jakey. You ready to get your thoughts back? Don’t worry—this part doesn’t hurt.

Jakey

Go for it…Aierrrrguh. OK, that did feel kinda weird.

D.
Not bad, though, right?

J.
Not bad. Hey, do you know why I was never able to see other people's thoughts in your mind?

D.
I do have some theories on that. If we start with the assumption that thoughts are essentially energy, that is, impulses that everyone's mind creates a little differently, then it becomes clear

---

A technical discussion then ensued concerning the nature of thoughts, and the unique personal signature that every brain stamps on them, and how a talented thought ripper could use that signature to group other people's thoughts in her brain without letting them drive her stark bat guano crazy, and why a young psychic might not be able to see those thoughts in her mind. Am not pasting it in here, though. Mostly because (and this is probably what you SHOULD expect to see whenever a psychic and a thought ripper get deep into conversation on the nature of mental energy) they soon stopped using complete sentences and then quit using words altogether and started sort of grunting at each other, which A) doesn't show up well on a transcript, and B) means nothing to those of us who aren't mind readers.

ANYWAY.

Once Dottie had left, I got this nice message on the feed:

Jakey
Hey, Emily. I know you've been eavesdropping, but I just wanted to say, it's really awesome having all my thoughts and memories back. You're one of the good ones!

Lily the Parrot
One of the good ones! One of the good ones!

Later

Dottie has arrived! It’s time for me to say goodbye (temporarily) to my mind. Here’s hoping this crazy plan works and I am not a mindless, drooling idiot for the rest of my days!

Later

I am back!!!!!!!!!!!! Here are the transcripts of what went down:

Me
OK, Raven, you take good care of me while I’m out of my mind. While my mind is out of me. Whatever.

Raven
Uh…Kay.

Dottie
Why don’t you sit down? Get comfortable? You’ll be unconscious for a while…
[Grunting noises—twenty-six minutes.]
All right, that’s all of it. Raven, she’s gonna sleep for a while. Hopefully I’ll be back before she even wakes up!
[Door opening and closing.]
[Gentle snores.]
[Miscellaneous cat sounds—a few meows, some purring, one episode of yakking.]
[Door opens and Dottie enters.]

D.
Raven! Hurry, I need you!

R.
No, I stay with Emily!

D.
Raven. Emily’s mind is in danger! EMILY! EMILY NEEDS YOU! COME WITH ME!

R.
OK, I go with you.

Ümlaut
[Entering the kiosk.]
Don’t worry, I’ll take care of Emily!

[Door slams as Dottie and Raven leave.]

Me
[Waking up.]
Gooooooooooooooo…gah?

Ü.
Oh wow. Dottie was right! She really did take everything! Not to worry, little one…Üncle Ümlaut is here. Let’s sing a song, OK? I know one you’ll like. It’s all about an itsy-bitsy spider…

Me
Laaaaaaaaaaaaa…Leeeeeeeee…Laaaaaa…Leeeee

Am censoring the remainder of that scene due to its extremely high mortification factor. Suffice it to say that Time Passed.

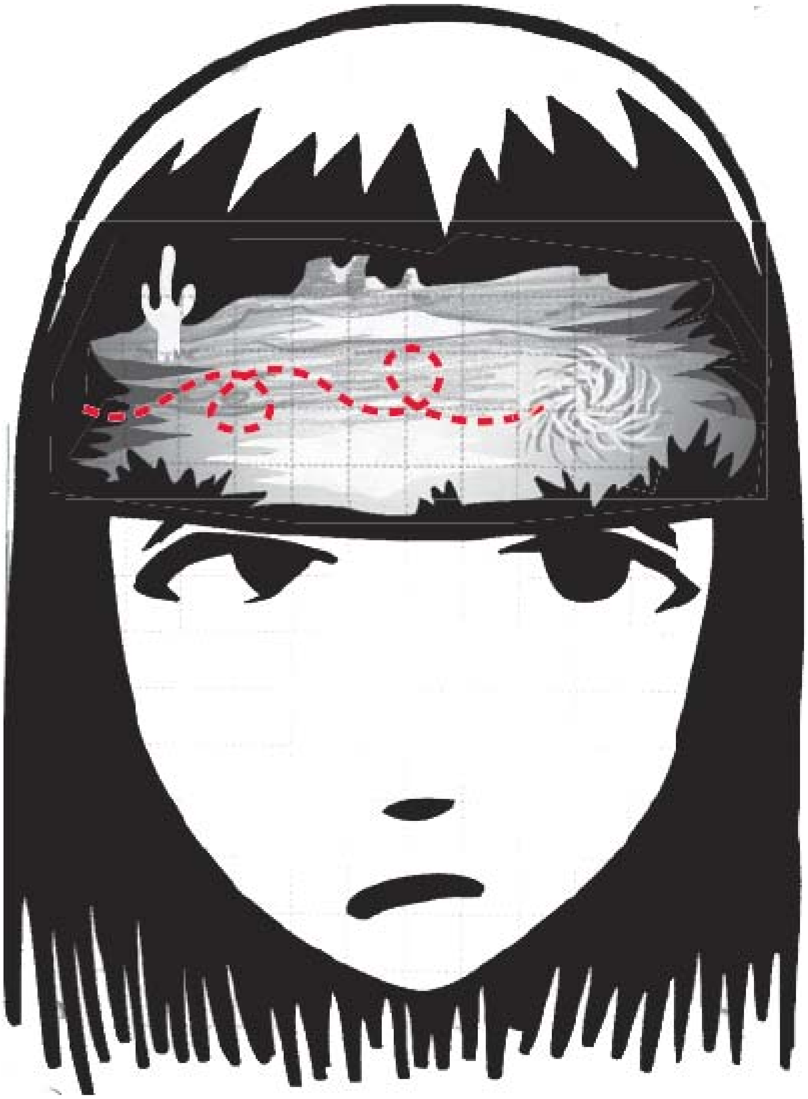
[Door opens.]
[Raven and Dottie enter.]

Dottie
Everything all right?

Ümlaut
Sure! We sang some songs, she had her lunch, took a good nap…

D.
Sheesh. Did you burp her, too? Don't answer that—it'll only embarrass her. Let's get her mind back where it belongs—UGH. THERE we go!

Me
AiiieEEurrrrrgabplgh!!!



D.
Feels weird at first, huh?

Me
Did it work? Did I summon the black rock? What’s Ümlaut doing here?

Ü.
[Bowing.]
Miss Dottie required Raven’s superior muscle, so she asked me to come guard you myself.

Me

Oh no! What happened? What did you need Raven for?

D.
[Sitting down heavily.]
[Groaning.]
I should have expected it—with all your thoughts in his head, Attikol was suddenly a WAY craftier dude and much harder to fool. He instantly knew all our plans and ordered his thugs to grab me. Luckily none of them was brave enough to touch me. I'd seen in your thoughts that he has a weakness for pretty women—AND an old crush on Raven—so I ran here and got her. She lured Attikol away from his bodyguards and then held him down so I could take back your mind.

Me
Wow. We're lucky that worked!

D.
SUPER lucky!
Otherwise…who knows how this would have ended?

Me
I guess his essential lameness was stronger than the craftiness he got secondhand from me, huh?

D.
Well, it's also possible that your mind sort of overpowered his, made him start to short-circuit or something. I should know, since I had your mind inside mine for a while…and that wasn't easy. I don't think most people's minds could hold one as complex as yours without some ill effects.
[Shuddering.]
If Attikol could have integrated your mind into his, it woulda been REALLY bad stuff. I never would have made this plan if I'd understood the kind of adversary I'd risk creating.

Me
REALLY? Not for any money?

D.
Not for any money!

Me
THAT'S your Bright Girl pride talking right there!

D.
Maybe so.

Me
Anyway, I owe you big-time for taking him down while I was out of commission.

D.
Not at all! You already paid me $8.

Me
Well, THAT turned out to be quite the bargain. Now, did he say his deepest wish was granted?

D.
He sure did.

Me
And did you rip the Shady Uncle stuff from his mind?

D.
[Tapping her head.]
Everything you asked for.

Ü.
Shady Uncle stuff, huh?

Me
YOU’RE still here?

D.
Hey…Ümlaut, you should probably go. Thanks for babysit—err, helping out.

Me
Hey hey hey. Can we trust you not to go blabbing to Attikol?

Ü.
[Blowing air disgustedly.]
I don’t do that guy any favors. And I’m grateful to you for removing the Shady Uncle stuff from his mind. I’ve been hearing it since we were kids. Maybe he’ll be a little less insufferable without it!

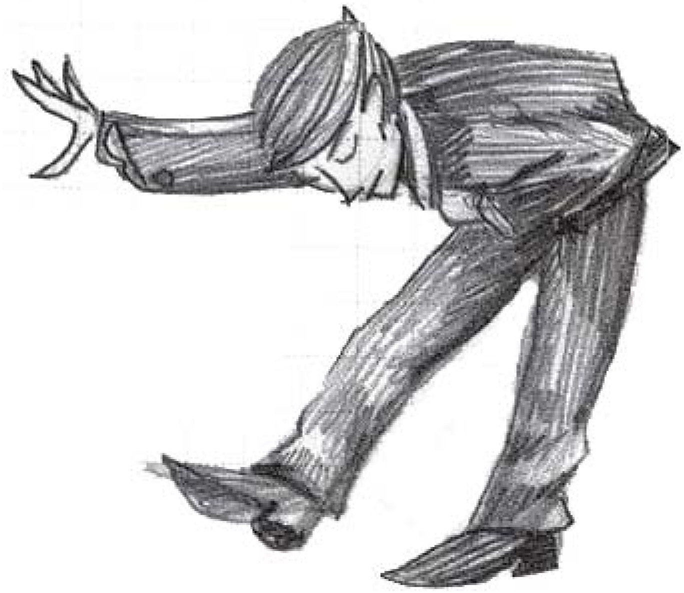
Me
You guys go back that far, huh?

Ü.
Yes, we’re cousins!

Me
Dude. SO sorry.

Ü.

[Bowing.]
Ladies, good night.



So there we have it—proof that I've granted Attikol's (current) deepest wish—if only for a few moments. I MUST have summoned black rock now! It should be just a matter of finding it. And I know exactly where I want to look first!

Later-in the Boardroom

Grizzbots!

There is no black rock here.

Now, I don't know for sure this is where it would appear. But based on something Dottie told me right before we parted ways, I thought it was a pretty good bet. She admitted there was another reason for her being here the night I came to install the TranscriptoVid—the night she first ripped my thoughts.

It wasn't to find me—she didn't expect me there at all.

She was looking for black rock!

That's right. When she ripped Attikol's summoning instructions, she also got a clue from Uncle Alaczar's diary on where black rock might appear once summoned:

When you fulfill the ancient fable
Hie as fast as you are able
Where Shady Uncles meet around the table.
Then receive your liquid sable!

Terrible as poetry but pretty clear as directions.
Which is why I came here first.
But…**NAGFLAX!** No black rock to be found.

May 23

Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.
—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

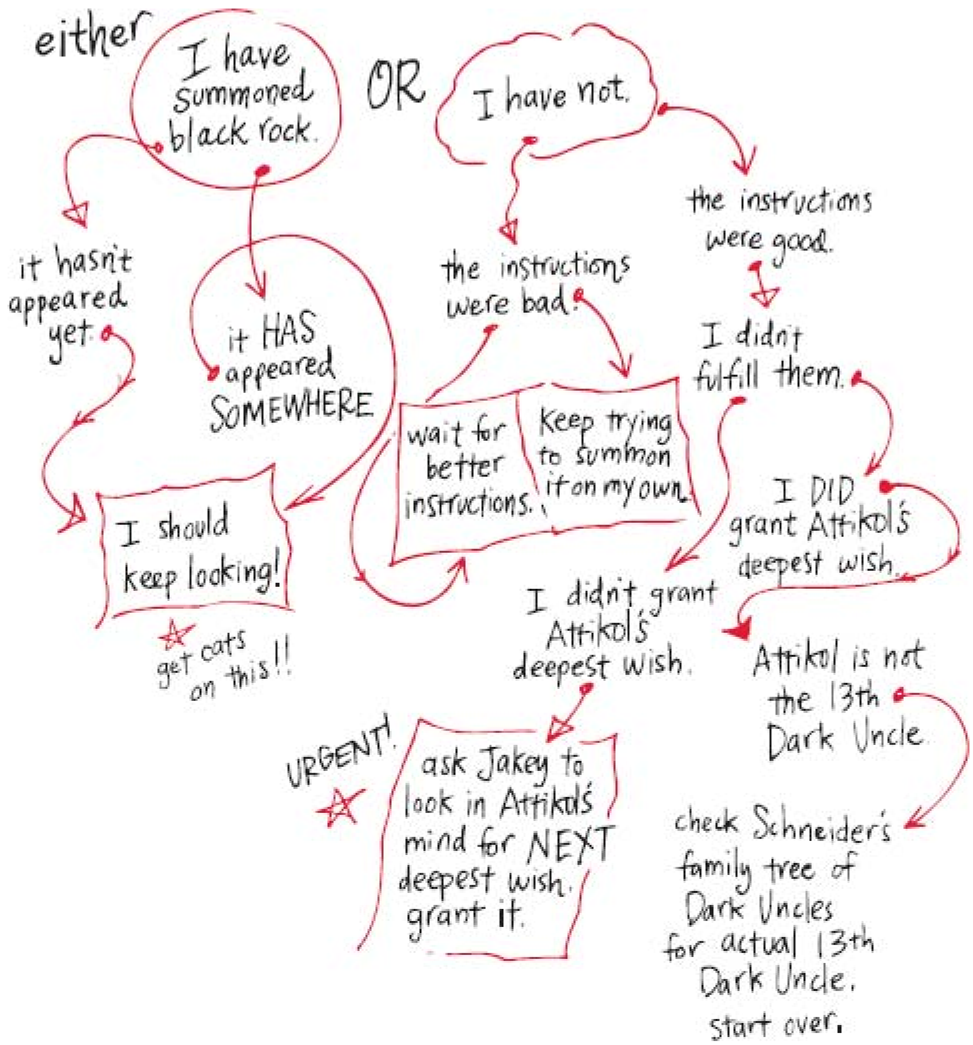
Only two more nights left in Seasidetown!! And my soul is feeling pretty constricted by the pressure to locate my black rock. Having a slight attack of Mush Mind, as well—not surprising after the full-brain rip-and-replace I put myself through. Am calling in the Posse to assist me. Am off to scour the town!

Later

Still no black rock.

I wonder what I'm overlooking? I've checked all the likely and unlikely spots I can think of…

OK. Need to break down my thoughts into a nice, orderly flowchart.


either
I have summoned black rock.
OR
I have not.
it hasn't appeared yet.
it HAS appeared SOMEWHERE
I should keep looking!
get cats on this!!
the instructions were bad.
the instructions were good.
wait for better instructions.
Keep trying to summon it on my own.
I didn't fulfill them.
I DID grant Attikol's deepest wish.
I didn't grant Attikol's deepest wish.
URGENT!
ask Jakey to look in Attikol's mind for NEXT deepest wish. grant it.
Attikol is not the 13th Dark Uncle
check Schneider's family tree of Dark Uncles for actual 13th Dark Uncle. start over.

Have dispatched the cats to continue the search around Seasidetown for black rock. I am on my way to see Jakey!

Later

Oh vaxdram it all. Jakey tells me that Attikol's CURRENT deepest wish is to read some of his vile love poems to a hushed, enraptured audience of around fourteen thousand people.

At the Budokan arena…in Tokyo, Japan.

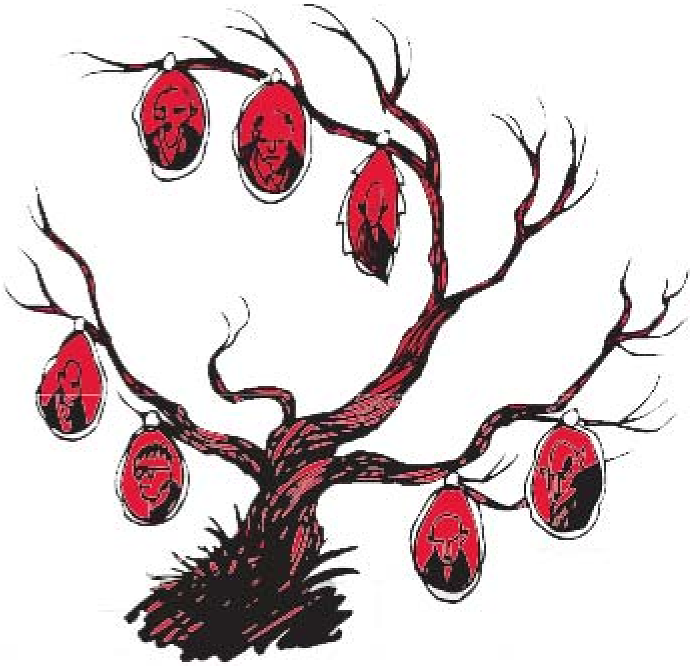
Blearrrrgh.

While I'm mulling over how I could possibly grant this, I'm going to go see Schneider to look at the Shady Uncle family tree.

Later

Have had a VERY revealing conversation with Schneider as we hunkered over said family tree.

Here's how it went:



Me
Have you been able to ID all the Shady Uncles? I want to be sure Attikol is really number 13.

Schneider
I think so. At least, for each Dark Girl, I've found an unmarried man in Attikol's family who lived at the same time. And that does make Attikol number 13.

Me
Hmm. Unmarried, that's it? Anything else the Uncles have in common? I notice they're all actually uncles.

S.
Except Attikol.

Me
Even though he calls himself Uncle Attikol?

S.
He never had any siblings. And his parents are deceased, so he's never going to become an uncle, either.

Me
[Looking at the family tree and the OTHER unmarried man in Attikol's generation.] [Breaking out in a light sweat.]
What…about…Ümlaut?

S.
Two nephews.

Me
[Breaking out in a heavy sweat.]
I gotta go!

Later

HUGE shocks!

I was running toward the Caravan to have a talk with Ümlaut when I ran into Raven and Ümlaut—together—on their way to see ME!

It was a very surprising conversation.

Me
What are YOU two doing together?

Ümlaut
Miss Emily, we need to have a talk about Raven.

Me
Is this about her programming?

Ü.
Sort of. Raven?

Raven
[Deep breath.]
Uh………I'm……uh, leaving.

Me
You're LEAVING?

R.
Uhhhh…………yeah.

Me
That's it, something is obviously wrong with your programming. Here, let me get a look in there, must be some wires crossed…

R.
No.

Me

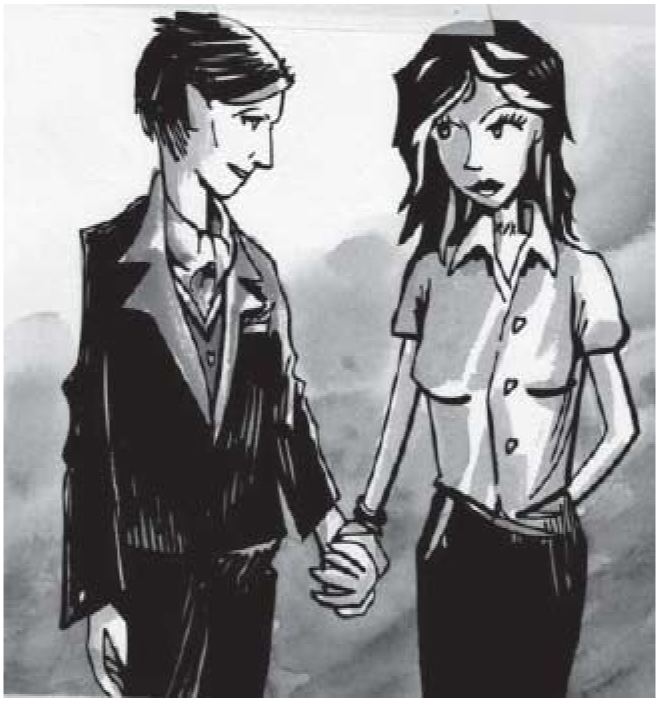
NO?

R.
No programming anymore…it's just me.

Me
Wha—wha—WHAT?

Ü.
I know this must be difficult for you. But the fact is that your golem has transcended her programming.

Me
Um. Wow.



Lovebirds!!?!!

R.
Uhhh…yeah. I'm, uh, declaring myself free.

Me

This is about me using you as a footstool, isn't it? OK, well, I guess I can respect that.

Ü.
Really? You're…you're going to let her go? That's…wonderful! That's amazing!

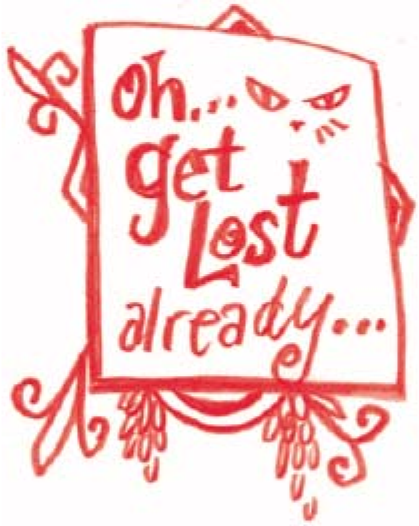
Me
Oh crabsheets. You two aren't in love, are you? RAVEN??

Ü. & R.
[Very happily.]
Yes!

Me
[Sending silent message to Raven—50% gratitude for her loyal service and 50% "What, him?"]
[Or maybe it was more of a 33/67 split.]
[Sighing.]
Ümlaut—you're not just using Raven for her immense strength? A girlfriend like that could really keep you safe from Attikol. Not to mention, make him very, very jealous.

Ü.
Oh no. I fully expect Attikol to spend a long, long time behind bars. I'll be running the Caravan of Wonders without him.

Me
Can you promise me that you'll take good care of her and let her visit me for regular tune-ups? Cuz I don't care if this is YOUR DEEPEST WISH, I wouldn't say yes if you were gonna treat her wrong.


Oh... get Lost already...

Ü.
It IS my deepest wish. And yes! I promise.

Me
Then I grant your wish! I GRANT IT! Raven, I give you your freedom. Do as you will with it!

And I felt it right away—a zinging rush of energy.

Gotta go check the Boardroom!

Later-outside Aunt Lily’s house

Fingers crossed that my dream has come true and I am moments away from finding black rock!!!!

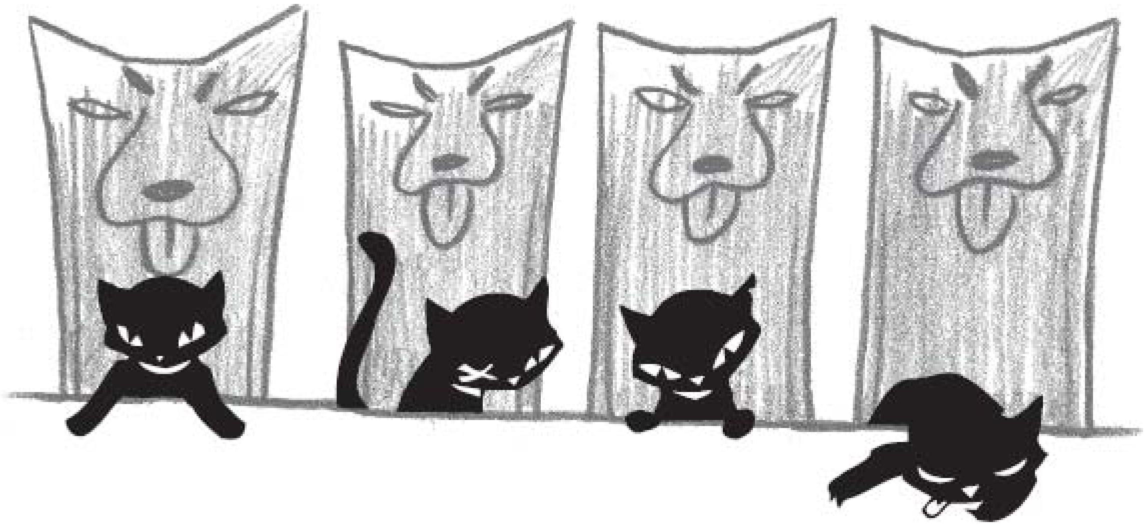
Later

I have not found black rock.

The cats and I let ourselves into Aunt Lily’s basement and entered the tunnels (disappointingly dry and empty!) and visited the Boardroom (equally dry and empty)—where we are now. I guess this will teach me never to get my hopes up!!!!!!

Five minutes later

Have just lifted my head off the table after several moments of dejected sighing because something was bothering me about the Boardroom chairs. I was sitting there staring across the table at the Posse, and my eyes kept bouncing between the shape of their heads and the shape of the carvings in the backs of the chairs.



I'm sure I remember the chairs having CAT shapes carved into the backs. Whereas the carvings on these chairs look quite a bit more canine than feline.

Am pretty puzzled by this. Did someone recarve the carvings? It doesn't really look like it. Of course, it HAS been more than two hundred years…I suppose these might be new chairs. But why DOGS? Granted, I don't know all there is to know about Dark Girls—but Aunt Lily had a cat, Aunt Emma had statues of cats, and the only relative I know of who had a dog was Uncle Boris.

Who was by no stretch of the imagination a Dark Girl.

And here's another thing. Two hundred years ago, there were initials carved into the backs of these chairs. The initials of all the Dark Girls who had been here before. One of the things I really wanted to accomplish on this trip was to add my initials to a chair. But I don't see any trace of initials anywhere! I GUESS they could have worn away over the centuries…I GUESS…

So I just don't know. Two hundred years is a long time and, sure, a lot can happen…

In secret tunnels that only my relatives knew about?

It's funny, but I feel SO sure there's black rock in my Boardroom… even though I am sitting right here IN the Boardroom. So sure, in fact, that I'd sooner believe this wasn't my Boardroom than believe my Boardroom wasn't filled with black rock.

Wow, writing that felt really good. Time for a little thought experiment!
IF…
this isn't my Boardroom,
THEN…

1. The dog carvings in the chairs would make more sense.
2. The Dark Aunts' initials being missing would make more sense.
3. Finding Attikol in here would make more sense.
4. The tunnels being different from my map would make more sense.
5. The basement of Aunt Lily's house looking different would make more sense.
6. The foundation of Aunt Lily's house looking so damaged would make more sense.
7. The fact that I couldn't FIND Aunt Lily's house would make more sense.
8. My persistent conviction that black rock would appear in my Boardroom would make more sense.
9. And NOT finding black rock here in THIS Boardroom would make more sense.

10. Because this is not my Boardroom.
11. Those are not my tunnels.
12. Aunt Lily’s house has been MOVED.
13. THOSE ARE NOT MY TUNNELS THIS IS NOT MY BOARDROOM OH YEAH OH YEAH OH YEEEEEAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!

Yes. It all goes to show that, most of the time, the simplest explanation is the true one. And once I stopped trying to come up with farfetched explanations for the differences and just accepted the truth of what I believed in my heart to be right, then the answer popped into my mind nice and clear.

Later

Have been thinking hard about where my tunnels might actually be. It’s not easy trying to figure out where something used to be, 200+ years ago! Finally I made a late-late-late-night call to Schneider to see if he could shed some light.

Schneider
[Real grumpy.]
This couldn’t have waited until the sun was up?

Me
Sorry, dude. I have to know if you ever heard anything about buildings getting moved around Seasidetown.

S.
It happened all the time! Especially the historic ones. They might as well have put wheels on some of the oldest buildings, they rearranged things so often.

Me
And are there records of where buildings used to be?

S.
It’s possible, but you never know with that library what you’ll find. I’ll take a look tomorrow…and call you when you’re most likely to be sound asleep.

Me
Very funny.

S.
One other thing I should mention. I think Attikol is bound to notice you’re staying in that old souvenir kiosk.

Me
What are you talking about? I know how to maintain a stealthy environment. We’re practically undetectable!

S.
You almost were. But then the plants started to grow.

Me
What? You mean the plants in the lot? No. Everything’s dead. Crispy and black.

S.
They’re black, all right…and looking really healthy. Have you been watering?

Me
Nope. And I’m sure you’ll excuse me if I need to hang up right now and go look at them.

Later

The plants are indeed growing!!!

When I got here, the sun was just starting to light up the block, and my first impression when I turned the corner and saw the lot was “Oh, someone’s been watering.”

So I got up close to check into the situation. That’s when I discovered new, tender growth on all the plants.

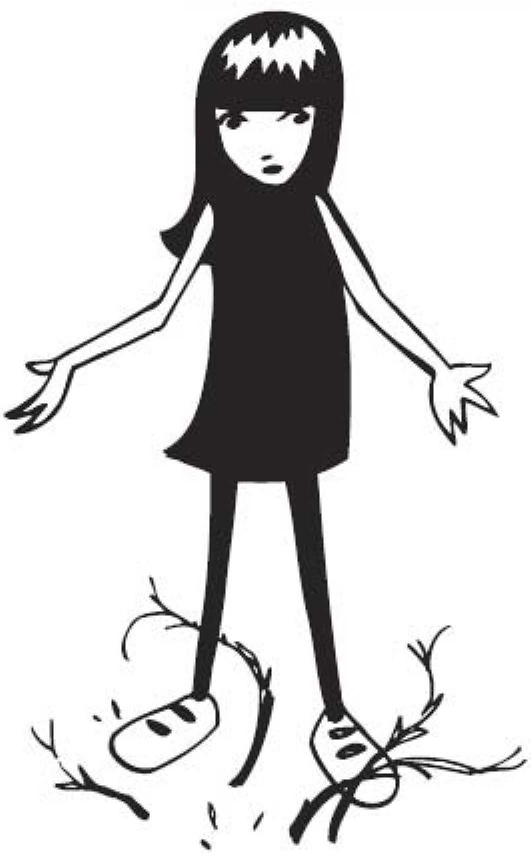
New, tender, inky-black growth.

And when I really took the time to look at them up close, I realized I didn’t know what to call them. And I must say, I did very well in Plant Identification 101.

BUT…I’m not saying I don’t recognize these plants. On the contrary. I recognize them very well. They’re just like the ones I saw in Great-Aunt Lily’s garden more than two hundred years ago.

The ones she used to water with liquid black rock.

So………



What happened to make them start growing?

Am feeling foggy in the brain. Must get some sleep.

May 24

Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.
—Edgar Allan Poe, "Eleonora”

Just woke up from a SUPER vivid dream. Not really sure if it qualifies as a nightmare or not. It was all about this cataclysmic eruption of liquid black rock, starting in my Boardroom. It filled the room and started flowing throughout all the tunnels. The cats and I were frolicking in it like we did under Aunt Emma’s house—riding the waves of hot molten rock and LOVING it. Gabflax, it was so real…

I have to find my tunnels, and soon! This is already my eleventh night in Seasidetown. Despite Schneider’s threats to call and wake me in the middle of the day, I haven’t heard from the guy. I guess I need to figure out where my tunnels are on my own!

LATER OH FRABCHEEX

I KNOW WHERE THE BLACK ROCK IS!!!!!!!!

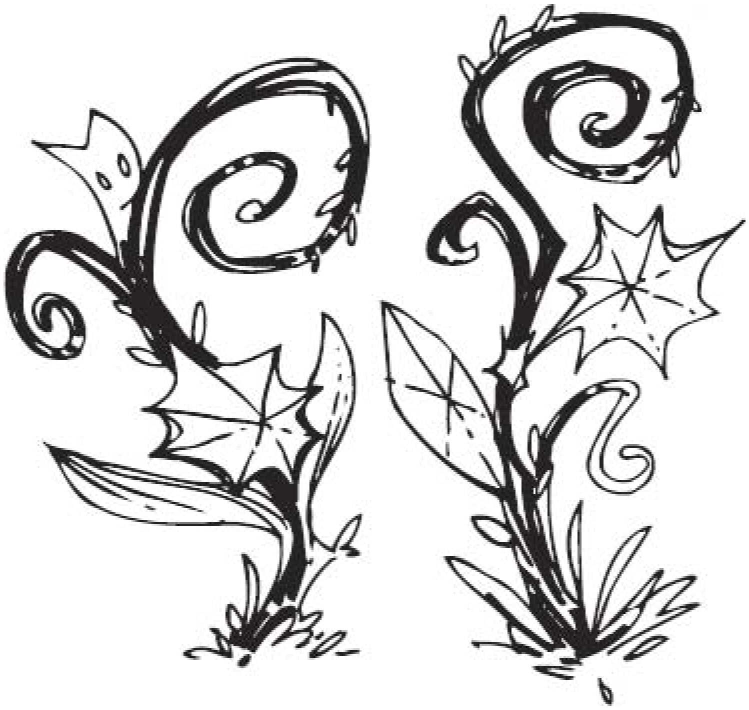
…That is, if I’m right that there IS any black rock to be found, I know where it will be!

I was just sitting around in the doorway of the kiosk, trying to enjoy the evening but feeling a lot of anxiety about it being my eleventh night in Seasidetown, and me still without my inheritance and all.

The moon was rising, and the Posse was frolicking among the black plants in the empty lot. Lovely scene, really, if I could only appreciate it… I took a huge breath, closed my eyes, shook my hair down over my face, and relaxed every one of my muscles…

And promptly fell over onto the ground.

I snorted out loud at myself, alerting the Posse. They stopped their game of hide-and-seek/catch-the-moth/pounce-on-Sabbath and looked over at me as I picked myself up off the ground. And that’s when I had my Moment. It was the coolest thing, and totally reminded me of what happened in the library when we were all studying the floor plan together and the Dark Girl symbol just popped out at me. The moon was at its highest, and I could see all four cats’ eyes glinting at me from the field of black plants, and then all of a sudden I SAW them: hundreds, thousands of Dark Girl symbols all around me.



Because every plant, every flower, every leaf formed it.

I KNOW WHERE THE DARK GIRL TUNNELS ARE!

Later

There is no keeping ME aboveground when I need to be underground!!! The cats and I rushed into the kiosk. I pried up the linoleum with an Uncle Boris Prestidigitation Pointer, and then we all commenced to digging with whatever lumber, souvenirs, future-garbage, nails, claws, or teeth presented themselves. 13 minutes later, Mystery gave a yowl and scrabbled backward out of the hole—she had broken through!

WE ARE IN THE DARK GIRL TUNNELS!!!!!!!!!!!

Later

Taking a break. No black rock yet. We've been remapping the tunnels—and YES, they are definitely Dark Girl tunnels! And I've found MY Boardroom, complete with cat-carved chairs and Dark Girls' initials. But still no black rock! Anyway, it's progress. Will write more later!

Later

BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACK ROOOOOOOOOOOOCK!

OH GLORY GLORY GLORY I HAVE MY BLACK ROCK

Here's what happened:

The cats and I were sitting in the Boardroom wondering what our next step should be. And I thought I should probably take the opportunity to carve my initials into one of the chairs like I'd planned to do.

So I made a little ceremony out of it, walking around the table, checking out the other initials one chair at a time, saying each aunt's name out loud in turn.

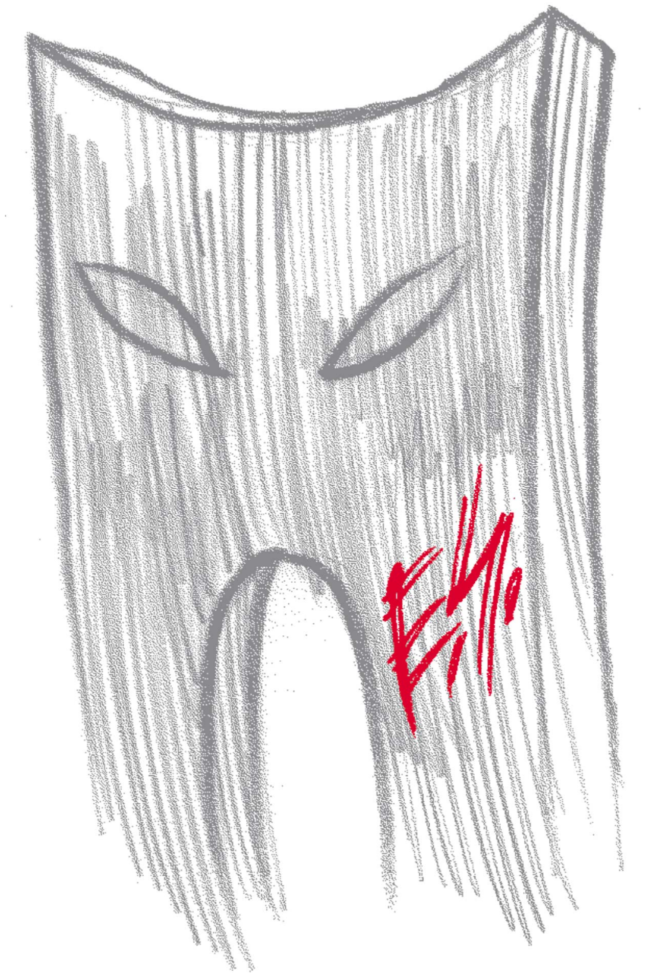
"Amelie LaRue…Leah Ciudat…Aimée Vreemd…Mallika Absonderlich…. Melisende Forestiero…Eleda Märklig…Mildred Különös…Camilla Underlig…Amelia Merwürdig…Millie Estrany…Lily Étrange…Emma LeStrande…

"And ME…Emily Strange."

And I carved my initials into the last chair.

And caught my breath as I realized that my twelve Dark Aunts were watching me from their seats around the Boardroom table.

I sat down heavily in my chair and looked around the room for a moment, stunned.

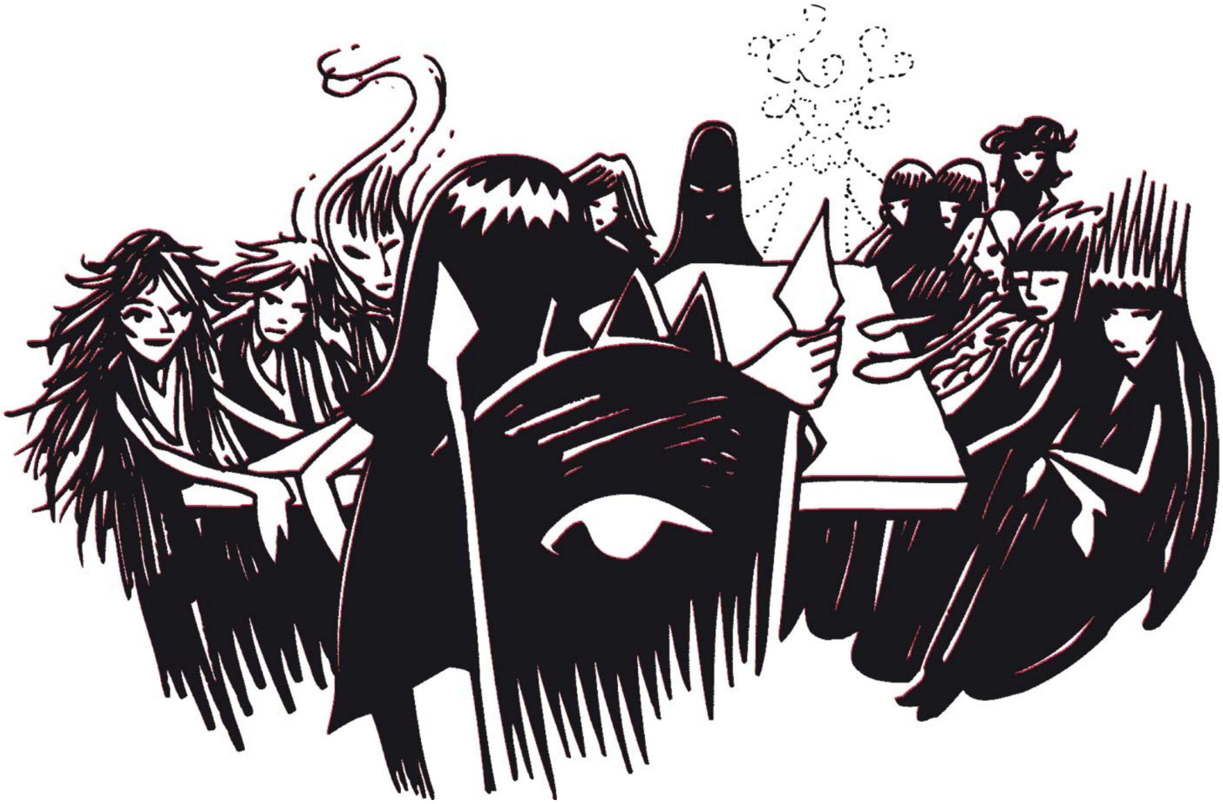


Me
[Whispering.]
Frabbling…jibwax…

Dead Dark Aunt Emma
Aren’t you going to say hello?

Me
Ha…heh…hello, Aunts.

Dead Dark Aunt Millie
[Kindly.]
Nnnno neeeeeeed to beee nerrrrrvoussss, Emmmmillly.



Me
Sure…at least you’re a familiar face, Aunt Millie. And Aunt Lily, too, though you’re all grown up.

D.D.A.E.
We are ALL quite familiar with YOU, dear, whether or not we’ve actually spoken.

Me
Hey, Aunt Emma…nice to make your acquaintance face-to-face, finally. [Looking all around the table.] And the rest of you as well. So, do you guys hang out a lot here in the Boardroom?

Dead Dark Aunt Camilla
[Laughing.]
Only once in a great while, Emily…when we welcome another Dark Girl to her full powers.

Me
[Solemnly.]
It’s truly an honor for me to be here.

Dead Dark Aunt Lily
[Winking at me.]
I know what you wish to ask. Well, Emily, go ahead!

Me
[Biting my lip.]
I don’t mean to sound impatient, but…am I ever going to summon my black rock? Didn’t I satisfy the instructions by granting Ümlaut’s deepest wish?

D.D.A.E.
[Smiling benevolently.]
Indeed you did, my dear, and thereby summoned black rock. Even now it rises from the depths!

Me
Flabjaxxx! Really?? So…where can I find it?

Dead Dark Aunts
[Pushing their chairs back. Looking under the table, where all four cats were scratching furiously in the dirt.]

Me
Oh no…I’m so sorry…Posse, I thought we were done with all this bad behavior!

Dead Dark Aunt LaRue
Emily, look closer…

And I leaned down to get a better look at what they were doing. No, they weren’t trying to cover up some disgusting feline indiscretion…they were UNCOVERING something very important.

BLACK ROCK!!!!!!!

Forgetting my Dead Dark Aunts (and my manners) for the moment, I kicked over my chair and dove under the table, scrabbling with my bare hands in the dirt. It took only a minute…then suddenly I was breaking through, I was falling, I was floating, I was SWIMMING in a fountain of majestic, mysterious, magnificent, miraculous, molten black rock.

Oh the lovely lovely black rock!

MY black rock this time.

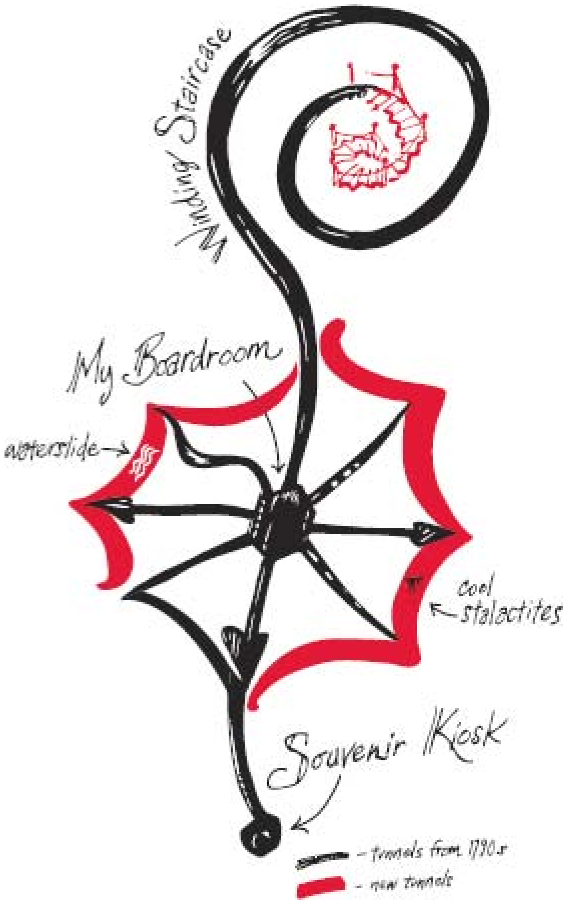
And I can tell the difference.

It's the same stuff…yet subtly tuned to ME, subject to MY control, in a way that Aunt Emma's and Aunt Lily's black rock was not. I knew as soon as I touched it. Though I've been doing a lot more than just touching it, you better believe that! The rock and I truly became one. It's so much more than just a tool, like the black rock I've played around with before was. This stuff is more like the essence of my true self, like a pure source of ultimate ME-ness.

Not that I was thinking anything like this at the time. I was in a place beyond thought. Beyond emotion. A state of…amplified existence, if that makes any sense. It was like I became more MYSELF than I'd ever been. And as my Self expanded, my body dissolved, and I became the black rock, which itself expanded until it—until I—filled the Dark Girl tunnels to their fullest. Yeah! That was ME filling the tunnels from one end to another. What a wild feeling to be so big, to be made of a million gallons of molten rock, to take the shape of the Dark Girl symbol—and, in a truer way than I ever have before, finally BE a Dark Girl.

And then something very interesting happened.

I felt my liquid self growing, building up pressure on the walls of the tunnels. But it didn't feel dangerous; it felt like exactly what I was supposed to do. The pressure grew, the walls groaned, and then kaplo-ooieee! Several new sections of tunnel were blasted into existence under the force of Liquid Me.


Winding Staircase
My Boardroom
waterslide
cool stalactites
Souvenir Kiosk
– tunnels from 1790s
– new tunnels

Making a brand-new shape in the Dark Girl tunnels.
Making a brand-new, fully evolved Dark Girl symbol.

Eventually I became aware of something BENEATH me…

Below the Boardroom, where the black rock had first broken through.

A place that called powerfully to me.

So I contracted my huge liquid self toward that spot and rushed downward through the earth, chasing my own source.

And I knew where I was! I'd been here before—only not in Seasidetown but in Blackrock. Under Aunt Emma's house—her house that later disappeared. It was the same winding staircase where I'd first encountered black rock. What a difference between Aunt Emma's black rock and mine, though—between swimming in it and DISSOLVING in it.

Still in the shape of a flood of black rock, I cascaded madly down the stairwell, swirling past closed rooms that I knew were mine to explore someday. Down and down I went; I don't know how far…but at some point it became far enough. I started to rise again. I began to remember myself, my body. And as I got nearer and nearer to the top of the staircase, I started to coalesce again, so that it wasn't a fountain of black rock that came up into the Boardroom but regular, human-shaped Me.

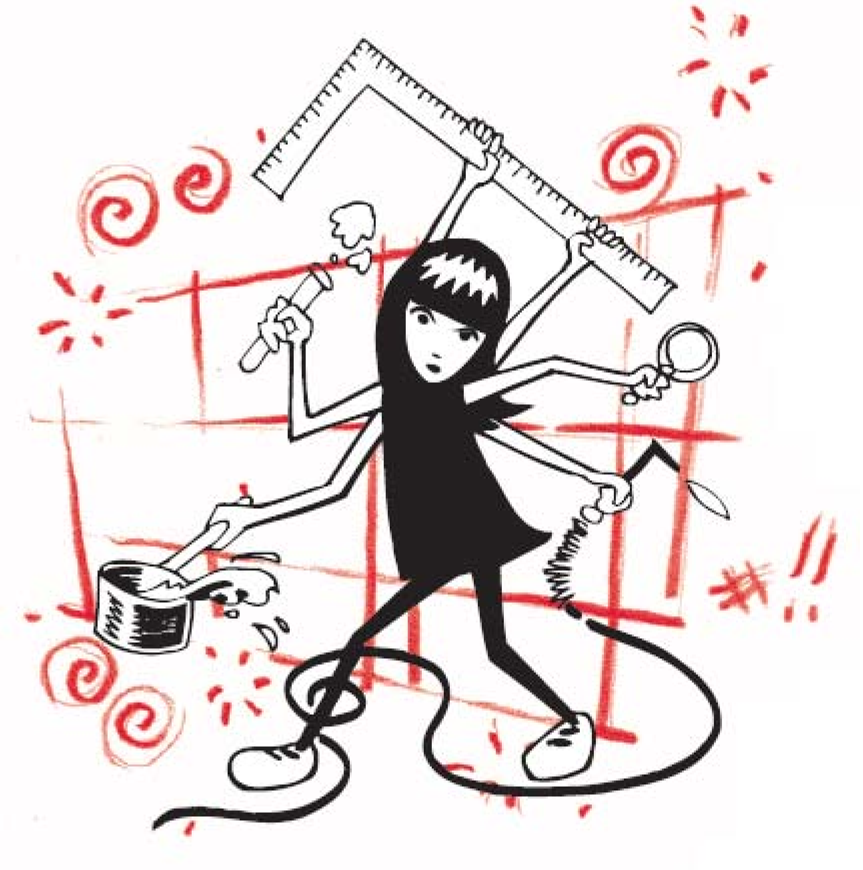
There were the cats, lounging in the Boardroom where I'd left them. The Dark Aunts had disappeared. I said a heartfelt "THANK YOU!!!" to any aunt who might still be listening, and then we all scrambled back up to the kiosk—where we are now. Because I knew then what my black-rock-fueled talent was—and I needed so bad to get into a lab and start unleashing that talent!

LET THE MAD INVENTING BEGIN!!!!!!!

Later

Ohhhh globbulets of joy! I looooooove puttering around in my portable laboratory by night!!!!!

Have been working under severe conditions here. My portable lab is about the size of a briefcase—one Bunsen burner, a soldering iron, a rudimentary particle accelerator…the basics.



Gotta be honest, though—I am really just complaining for the fun of complaining. None of that really matters. I seriously think that with my newly black-rockified talents, I could create cooler inventions than ever, with no lab at all! I still love all the physical trappings—the scent of the haptoglobin, the sting of the otocytes, the buzzing of the retinoids—but that's all just gravy. Nostalgia value, really. I don't need all those SUPPLIES now that I've got black rock running through my veins. (So to speak. Have performed a quick test with a needle and confirmed—I do still bleed blood.)

Anyway. Have been working for a few hours now and I'm starting to get the hang of what my black rock does.

And I haven't found any limits yet on what it can do:

Take any shape…✓

Synthesize any substance…✓

Activate any reaction…✓

And in short, make reality out of my every idea…✓

Later

Finally got my fill of weird science—for tonight, anyway. I know there will be many more wondrous lab sessions in the future!!! Now we're just relaxing after a truly epic night. The cats are frolicking in the field, where the black plants have only grown taller, healthier, and inkier. Raven is here, too—she stopped by for a visit. She and I are sitting in the doorway, soaking up the last moments of our last night in Seasidetown and spending some quality master-golem time together before she and Ümlaut begin their beautiful journEAAYUKAHCHKphlepphuh. Flambax, was grossing myself out just by writing that!!!!

Me
So, Raven. How long has this thing between you and Ümlaut been going on?

Raven
Uh…iono, since Blackrock?

Sheesh—this is what I get for bringing a golem to a town where their whole deal is Revolution, Freedom, and Independence!!!!! (Even if those are mostly just catchwords used to sell future-garbage.) Am still kind of amazed she is throwing me over for that guy. For **A** guy! On one hand, it's a blow—I may need to hire a full-time Sherpa. On the other hand, it's a relief. I am tired of being a dictator, not to mention constantly bailing that golem out of trouble. Let her be Ümlaut's problem for a while!

Anyway. She's agreed to help me for the rest of my stay here in Seasidetown, which is nice of her. And for the future, she's promised me frequent visits for sparring, band practice, and heavy lifting.

Also…I should be completely honest here and mention that I am not exactly sad about having someone to keep an eye on the 13th Shady Uncle for me.

OK—the sun is rising and my eyelids are drooping. To bed with us!

May 25

Meekness: Uncommon patience in planning a revenge that is worthwhile.
—Ambrose Bierce

Middle of the day. >Yawn.< >Squint.<

Waiting for Vivi and Dottie (and NannyGuard, of course) to pick me up. They are going over to Attikol's hotel to interview him for Dottie's movie. (And, I believe, arrest him as well.) Am not pleased to be awake in the daytime but am VERY pleased that I was invited along. Am happy all over again that I have my TranscriptoSpies and can capture every nuance of Attikol's defeat without handwriting everything!

Later

Have to handwrite everything, because the first thing the mayor said was to remind me that it’s illegal to record people without their permission. I am so busted! I have agreed to reveal all my surveillance installation locations so my equipment can be removed. Man, Mayor Vivi seems quite well-informed of what goes on in her town. Wonder if there’s a little Bright Girl talent at work there, or if she’s just really really good at her job?

Later

We are in the mayor’s town car on the way to the hotel. Mayor Ebenezer is up in front with the driver. Dottie and I and NannyGuard are crammed in the back with a lot of film equipment. (Although I suppose I should start calling NannyGuard by her new title, CameraNanny. Her guarding skills are much less in demand now that Dottie is so very high-minded.)

Dottie asked me if I’d made any progress finding my black rock, and I did not hesitate for a moment—I lied my cheeks off, telling her sadly that I hadn’t managed to summon it yet.

Dottie: Too bad. So, any ideas what will get your flow started?

Both of us: [Snorting hilariously.]

Me: Maybe a little prayer? Are you there, black rock? It’s me, Emily.

D: Oh, I saw the after-school special on this one. You get your black rock, save the town from something or other, and end up running for mayor when my mother announces her resignation.

Me: I most certainly do NOT run for mayor! My pet ZombieAlienNinjaYetiSpiderVampireMonkey-Dragon runs for mayor. AND wins.

D: And mounts a heroic campaign to uncover decades of corruption in City Hall.

Me: Thereby making way for Seasidetown’s very first all-night restaurant and exclusively nonrainbow zombie disco…which then becomes the setting for an interspecies monster massacre of insane proportions.

D: What??? C'mon, is this gonna be an incisive exploration of the issues facing today's politically active teen…or some kind of surreal, tongue-in-cheek splatter-flick?

Me: I think you know my answer to that.

D: We probably shouldn't collaborate, huh?

Me: Couldn't agree more.

Later

The archenemy is neutralized!!!!

Here's how it all went down:

Mayor Ebenezer's limousine pulled up to the hotel just behind a fleet of police cars. There were officers everywhere. I made sure my slingshot was well tucked away. The sight of it tends to enrage even the most genial of cops.

The first stop was Jakey's room. Backed by her police force, Mayor Ebenezer told Ivac and Sharpie to get lost; then she personally apologized to Jakey for having overlooked his imprisonment, however temporarily… and then she informed him he was freed.

He burst into tears and ran into her arms for a hug, while Dottie watched ecstatically, mouthing a silent "Are you getting this?" to CameraNanny. As for me, I pretended to be extremely busy picking spiderwebs out of my socks. I mean, I think my cousin has every right to act like a nine-year-old now and then…but I really doubt he wants me witnessing it.

Once Jakey's tears were dried and dignity restored, it was time for us all to confront Attikol. Mayor Ebenezer entered Attikol's room first, followed by Dottie and CameraNanny. Jakey and I came in behind them and took strategic positions near the door, where Attikol could see us enjoying the spectacle.

ATTIKOL: My lovely Vivi! And Dottie dear! How wonderful to see—

MAYOR Shut it, Attikol.

Ebenezer:

Officer Winters: [Entering the room.] Right behind you, Mayor.

ME: Arrest this man.

A: But…why?

ME: For your criminal treatment of a certain nine-year-old psychic.

A: But Vivi! Surely we don’t need to involve the police in a little dispute over child-labor laws? After all, I believe there’s an exception for children working in theater?

ME: There certainly is, Attikol. There’s also a law about PAYING children who work in theater.

A: Oh, well, I’ve been…holding his pay for him. He’s so young, and…

ME: And I hear he’s been trying to leave the medicine show for some years now?

A: Yes, well, he doesn’t know what’s good for him, that’s all—

ME: Attikol, do you know the legal term for what you’re doing?

A: Uh…creative profit management?

ME: SLAVERY.

A: Uh-oh.

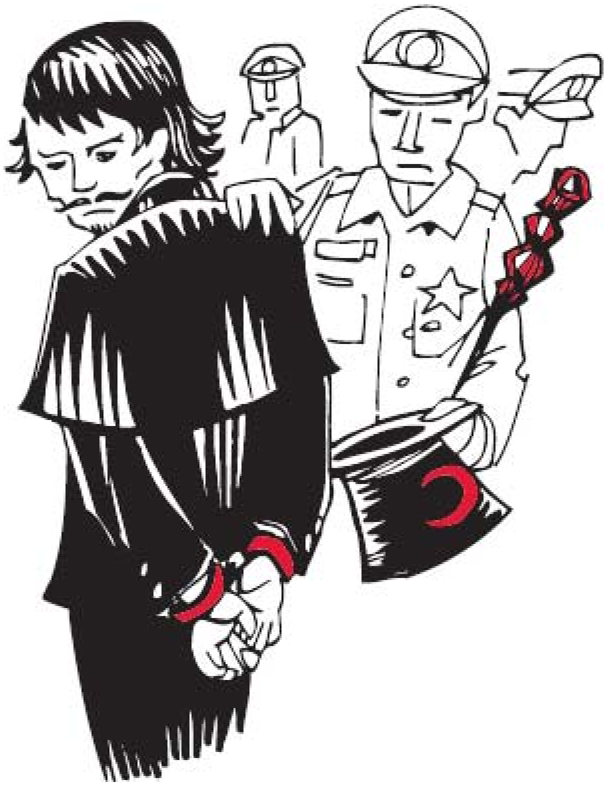
ME: Yes, well, the upside of all this is that I’m going to prosecute your case myself.

A: [Gasping in relief.] Thank you!

ME: [Shaking her head in disgust.] Not to let you off! I’m going to see to it that you serve the maximum sentence.

A: No! Vivi, I implore you! Think of our friendship!—At least…think of my money!

ME: [Warmly.] Attikol, most of your money is going to be awarded to this young man in damages when I’m through with you.



Attikol’s grand takedown! YEAH!!!!!

And with those noble words, she escorted Jakey out of the hotel into freedom…while her police force escorted a handcuffed Attikol OUT of freedom.

Am very glad now that I had Dottie leave Attikol with some of his Shady Uncle knowledge. To make eye contact with him one last time and see the shock…the recognition of all he had lost…the destruction of all his hopes for black rock…

Oh what a glorious feeling that was!

Later

Am now hanging out in Jakey’s trailer, helping him pack up his things. Am somewhat cranky with all this sunlight exposure. Am NOT as sleep deprived as I normally would be, though—black rock is great for that! Have summoned doses as needed to keep me going.

Despite said crankiness, am really really really glad that my cousin is finally out of Attikol’s clutches. Have apologized sincerely for making him wait so long to get rescued.

JAKEY: That's OK, man. It was worth the wait, cuz you took Attikol down as well!

ME: Not to mention bringing on Dottie's civic pride. Nothing like killing three birds…errrr, sorry, Lily.

LILY: SQUAWK! THAT'S OK, MAN! THAT'S OK!

Later

Phony macaroni!

I am a silly.

I bet I know where those Dark Aunt diaries are!

Gotta go check out my theory…more later…

Later

AHHAHHAHHAHHHAH I have the Dark Aunt diaries!!!!!!!!

Here's what I realized: The LIBRARY is actually a MAP of the Dark Girl tunnels! And, as well, a map to the REAL secret book vault, the one where Emma hid the diaries, down in said tunnels.

So the cats and I made one more trip underground. Made our way to the spot corresponding to the secret vault in the library. Of course, there were no bookshelves down in the tunnels…just a pile of lumber, arranged to look like it was holding up some loose dirt.

This time, though, I saw what I'd overlooked last time.

Three days ago, when I searched the Shady Uncle tunnels for black rock, I pushed a beam about ten feet into the dirt of the tunnel walls. I mean, I assumed that's what I was doing. Now I realize I was pushing it right into the Dark Girl tunnels! They must be only a few feet away from each other at this point.

That beam didn't catch my eye when I was down here earlier. It blended in with the other lumber piled up against the wall. But that time, I wasn't looking at this spot as location of the secret book vault, either! With a more critical eye, I quickly saw that A) this beam is perpendicular to the other ones, B) it's dirtier than the other ones, and C) it looks like it may have knocked some of the other lumber off the pile when it pushed through.

Well, that was enough to get me looking closer. I pulled the lumber out of the way and THERE, oh flamjoozles of joy, was a panel—easily removed—concealing a small chamber—quickly perused—full of DIARIES!

Now here's the kicker.

I fully expected to find Aunt Emma's diary. And there it was. Hoped to find Aunt Lily's. Hooray—that was there, too. Wasn't sure about Aunt

Millie’s—that paper would be terribly ancient by now—but I got that as well!

What I NEVER expected to find, sitting right there on top, with a signed note and everything, was the diary of Uncle Riordan!

Ümlaut and Attikol’s Shady Uncle Riordan, that is.

!!

Well. Maybe this doesn’t actually warrant all sixty-six of those exclamation points. After all, Aunt Amelia did say that there would be noble Shady Uncles!

Here’s the note that was attached to the diary:

For the 13th Dark Girl:

Please forgive my intrusion into your tunnels. I have tried to respect their integrity and damage them as little as possible. I felt it essential that my diary find its way to you. Unlike some of my relations, I am of the belief that our families are fated somehow to make peace and to use the treasure of the black rock together. After all, we share a common ancestor. Surely mere conflict and quarrel cannot be our mutual destiny!

> ***I have done what little I can. My meager powers of fortunetelling show me that the son of my nephew Abelard is destined to be the 13th Shady Uncle. But a boy raised with this knowledge risks arrogance and conceit—in short, he risks becoming the kind of Shady Uncle who will destroy any chance of peace between our families.***
>
> ***Thus, I have planted certain seeds in my nephew Damien's mind. He now believes HIS son shall be the next Shady Uncle.***
>
> ***I hope I have helped.***
>
> ***May Darkness and Shade reunite! May our families make their peace!***
>
> ***Uncle Riordan***
> ***The 12th Shady Uncle***

WOW! WOwoowoWOoOoowoow.

Have flipped through Uncle Riordan's diary. Some other mysteries have been cleared up—e.g., why Aunt Lily's house was over the Shady Uncle tunnels (Uncle Riordan's doing), why there were Shady Uncle tunnels in the first place (same reason there were Dark Girl tunnels—we're just a tunneling couple of families), why the lot over our tunnels was vacant (Uncle Riordan purchased it and left it in his will to Abelard, and thus to Ümlaut, with stipulations that it never be developed—stipulations that Damien tried to steamroll by building the ill-fated souvenir kiosk).

Have decided I will return the favor and make a small gesture toward peace between the families, by handing over this diary to Ümlaut…and paying Dottie $5 to give him all of the Shady Uncle knowledge, as well! I know I could be shooting myself in the foot here, but A) I am a big believer that one has a right to one's ancestral knowledge, B) I kinda owe it to the memory of Uncle Riordan, and C) what chance does Ümlaut EVER stand of becoming a worthy adversary without it?????? I mean, peace is all well and good, but I need to have my fun, too.

Later

My trunks are packed. Raven has been kind enough to help me get them into the van one last time. She and Ümlaut took pity on me and agreed to drive me home. Not that I can't drive, but I tend to get pulled over an awful lot on suspicion of being about three years too young for a license.

Am now hanging out in front of the hotel thanking Schneider for the research that led me to discovering that Ümlaut is the 13th Shady Uncle.

Me: If you like, I can make you a copy of Aunt Emma's diary—the nonprivate stuff, I mean!

Schneider: I would love that. By the way, congratulations. Looks like Attikol is going to be spending some years in prison. Not bad!

Me: Thanks, man.

S: Heard you freed Raven, too.

Me: It was kind of a mutual thing.

S: Sure. Let her be Ümlaut's problem for a while, right? Hey, but aren't you concerned that Attikol's engineers still have your blueprints? You don't want to wipe their minds of that knowledge?

Me: No, see, there's a bit of hero worship there—the team agreed to delete the blueprints, out of professional courtesy.

S: Hey…are we having a wrap-up chat, here? Is that what we're doing?

Me: You know it. I think this is the part where the mayor rewards you for your…umm…courageous…research…by appointing you Seasidetown’s new City Planner, and asking you to reverse the aesthetic damage her predecessors inflicted on the town with their tourism campaign.

S: No, I think this is the part where the mayor rewards you for your girlish pluck and determination with a commemorative plaque for your treehouse.

Me: This would definitely be the part where, as a final gesture of trust, I high-five Dottie. IF I were the kind of person who ever high-fived anyone.

Dottie: [Wandering over to interrupt.] Isn’t it actually the part where you give me a working DuplicatoDevice of my very own?

Me: But only after you convince me you would never, never use it for evil?

D: Only…the sequel reveals that I lied?

Me: And I have to cobble together some kind of truth-seeking contraption to discover your real intentions—a plot to take over the local movie theater for a whole day and play nothing but historical documentaries?

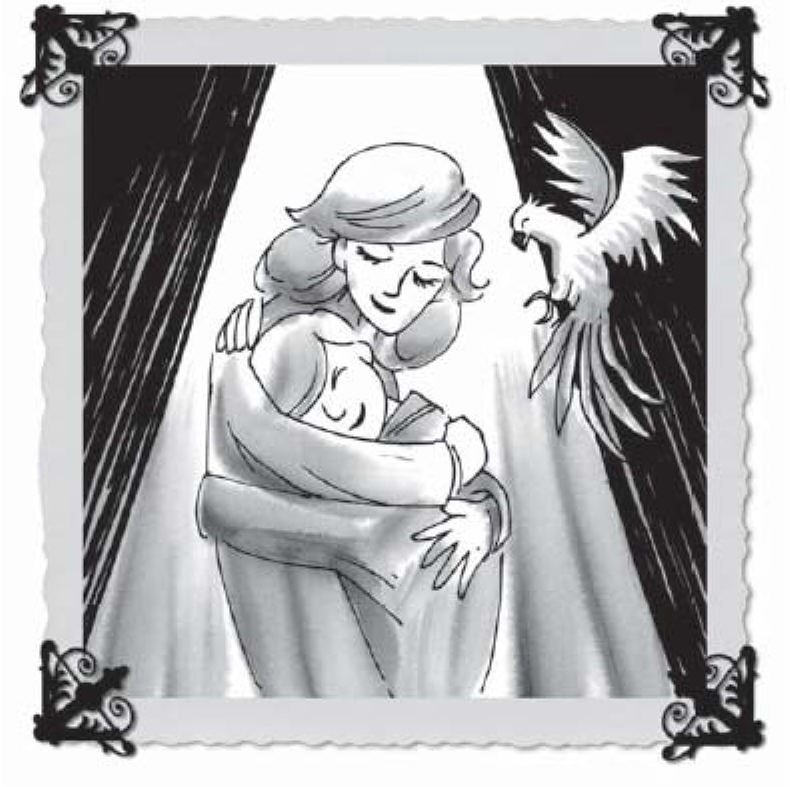
D: Ooh, nice touch. Can we also use the truth-seeking contraption to reveal that you and I are distant cousins?

Me: Of course. Gotta get your money’s worth out of Ye Olde Gadget Device.

D: Ye Olde Device Device.

Later

Have seen Jakey off. He has had an emotional reunion with his mother and they are both thrilled to be on their way home. (Duh+Duh=Duh.)



When we said our goodbyes, he handed me the following priceless piece of entertainment:

To a Lady Loved
(From Attikol's poetry diary)

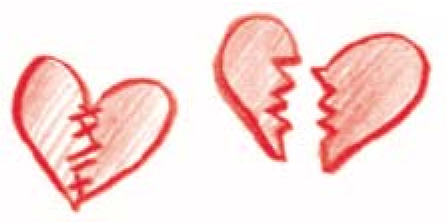
Your heaving sighs, your raccoon eyes,
You fell into my arms.
I've got a manly chest and a heroic quest:
To win over your charms.

To a Lady Loved
You're my attractive dove
Though your name is Raven
It is thee I am cravin'.

Your skin so pale, my voice so male,
My handsome beard, chin, forehead, eyes, eyebrows,

cheekbones, and lips.
Your synthetic hair, your ears so fair
And pointy at their tips.

To a Lady Loved
Give my heart a tug
I need all your love
Don’t forget that I am very rich and good-looking.



Later

We are on the road! Raven and Ümlaut are in the front seat, making lovebird eyes at each other and causing me to gag periodically with their ridiculous conversations. I am hiding out in back under a pile of cats, headphones on, listening to Mom’s punk-rock mix tapes, and reading Dark Girl diaries!!!!! Just the thing on a long road trip.

Later

Back at home! Almost morning. Have said hi to Mom and called a cab for Raven and Ümlaut (couldn’t wait to get those two out of my hair).

ME: Now, don’t forget, golems can live on indefinitely if kept out of the damp!

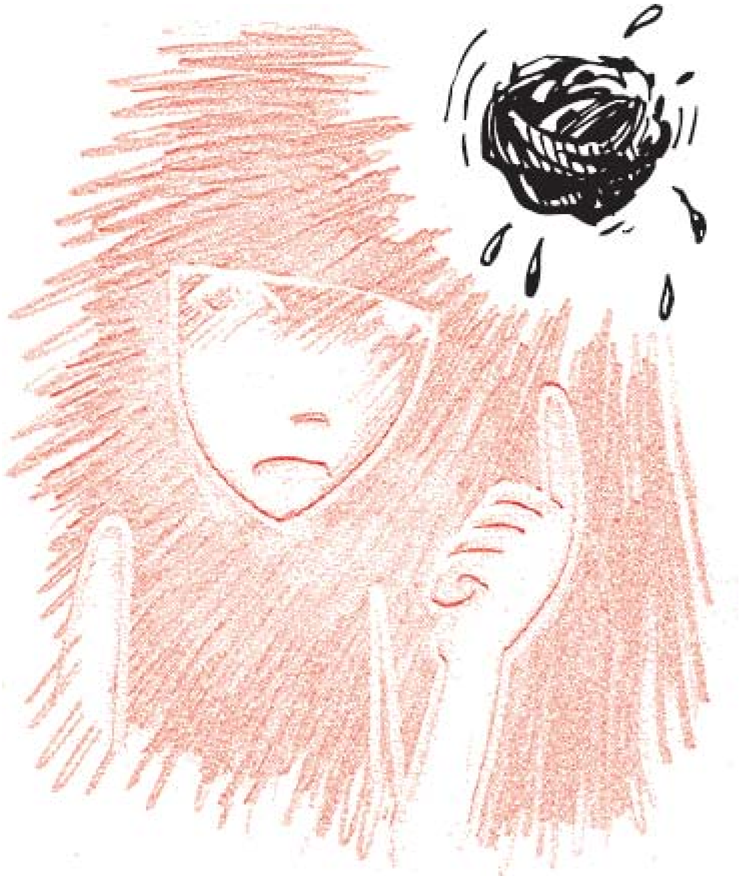
ÜMLAUT: [Tired.] Yes. I got it. GOODBYE! GOOD NIGHT!

Am quite exhausted myself. Posse and I are going straight to bed!!!

May 26

Life could be wonderful if people would leave you alone.
—Charlie Chaplin

It is SOOOO good to be home again! Have unpacked trunks.



Took a lot longer without Raven’s help. Am laughing at myself for packing all these empty jars and miscellaneous containers…I guess I really thought I would need THEM to bring home my black rock, when the reality is so much better!

Later

What do you know—this evening over dinner Mom told me that Great-Aunt Millie disappeared! Turns out, it was the same day I found my black rock. I offered to search the attic and basement for her, or call that ghostbuster dude we’ve hired in the past—but Mom stopped me with a sad, meaningful glance.

Mom: [Gently.] Emily…I don’t think we’re going to find her this time.

Me: [Snorting.] What is she, a young fawn I’ve raised by hand, who must at last return to her wild nature? Don’t be silly. I ALWAYS find her!

M: No…she told me to let you know she and Aunt Emma were going on to the Great Beyond…and they’d see you when you…um…y’know…

Me: Kicked the bucket? Bought the farm? It’s OK, Patti, go ahead and say it.

M: …Arrived.

So yeah. No more Dark Aunts on this side, I guess. No more late-night sessions on the Dark Girls with Aunt Millie. No more little chats with Aunt Emma via golem.

No, it’s just me now.

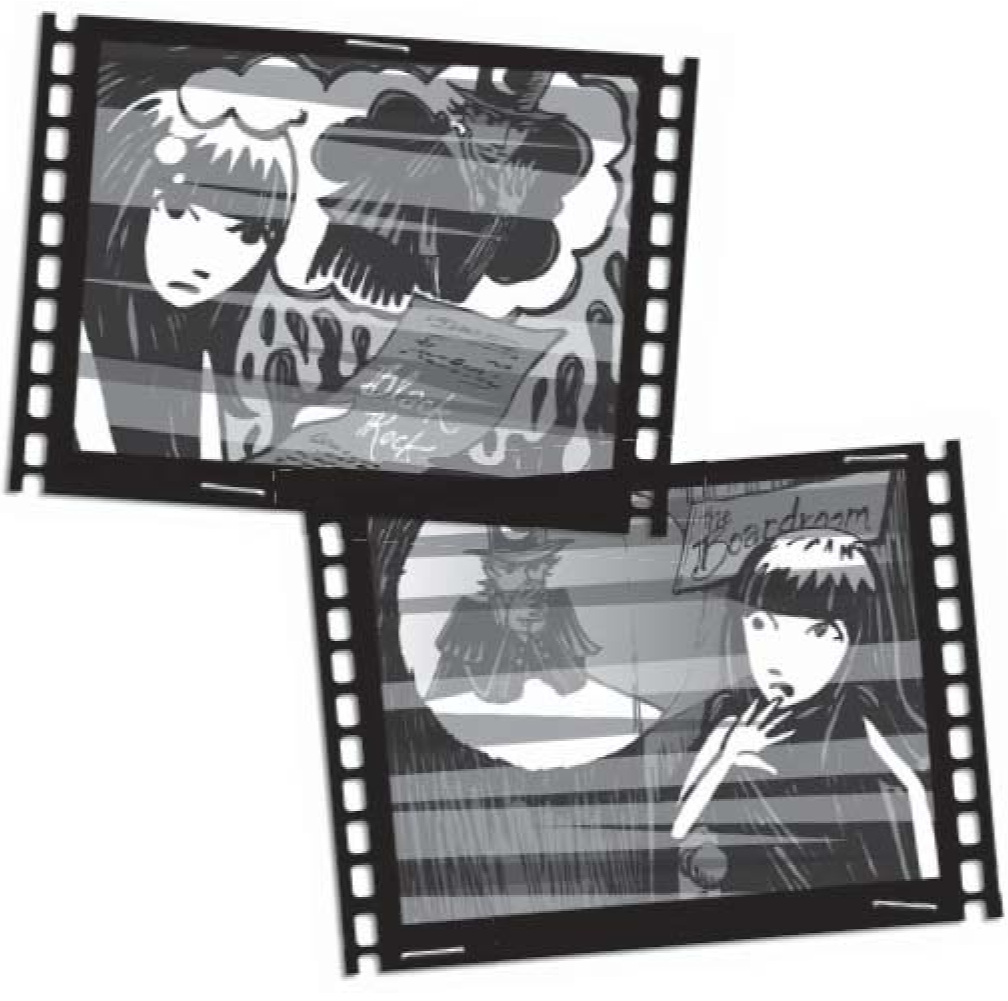
Carrying the Dark Girl torch into the future, all by myself.

Alone at last!

AHAHHAHHAHAH!

APPENDIX

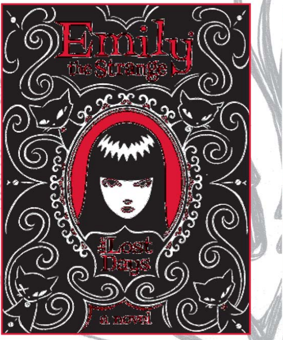
My A+ documentary film for Mom…a few key scenes, just to give the general flavor.


Black Rock
The Boardroom

WA

13
LOST

READ ALL OF EMILY'S STRANGE ADVENTURES: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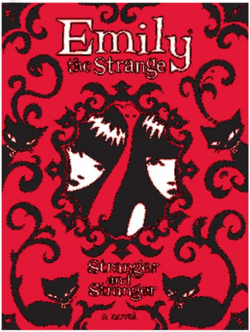
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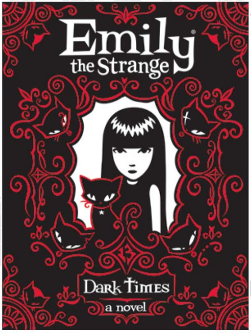
Emily the Strange
Dark Times
a novel

About the Author

Emily the Strange: 13 years old. Destined for a life of infamy, maybe, if she feels like it. More likely to end up sequestering herself with her four black cats, knitting bizarre cozies for esoteric laboratory equipment, painting intricate portraits of imaginary monsters on grains of rice, and building a teleportation contraption out of twine, trucker caps, and tarantula eggs.

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